

Holy War (But Not THAT Holy War)

Isaiah 11:4-5; 59:17; Ephesians 6:10-24

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Ever since the 9/11 Islamic terrorist attacks, the term “holy war” has become a byword in the world. These terrorists always refer to the medieval Crusades of the Europeans against Islamic states starting in the 11th century. The goal of the Crusaders was not only to recapture the “holy city” of Jerusalem, but to defend itself from the attacks by Islamic kings. At the height of its power, Muslims fought their way to the gates of Vienna in the 16th century but were defeated.

The Pope and the European kings cite Bible verses that point to God as exacting vengeance upon his enemies, such as Psalm 110:5–6, *“The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.”* But passages like these are misapplied to Christian warfare against its enemies, instead of correctly interpreting them as God’s judgment at the end of the age. This end will come when Jesus returns from heaven and destroys all his enemies.

Our text today, commonly called “The Armor of God,” is not about Christian warfare with swords and spears, guns and bombs, and planes and ships. It is spiritual warfare against the devil and his evil forces, using truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer. So this morning, we will meditate on **“Holy War (Not THAT Holy War),”** in three points: first, **“Be Strong in the Lord”**; second, **“Stand Firm”**; and third, **“Praying at All Times.”**

“Be Strong in the Lord”

In this letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul encourages them to *“be strong in the Lord.”* They were Christians living in a pagan city where there is rampant idolatry, sexual immorality, and corruption centered in the Temple of Diana. They practiced dark spiritual things such as black magic, sorcery, divinations and incantations. So the Christians there were in constant struggle against these pagan superstitions and practices. Paul had to remind them that they must put on the new righteousness in Christ, having put off their old pagan ways. They must walk with love and wisdom through Christ. In their households, they must submit to one another according to the authority structure ordained by God from the very beginning in creation.

So Paul begins his encouragement by saying, *“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”* (v 10). God gave the same exhortation to Joshua after he appointed him to lead the conquest of Canaan, *“Be strong and courageous”* (Jos 1:6). David *“strengthened himself in the Lord his God”* in his battle against the Amalekites (1 Sam 30:6). During the Babylonian exile, God promised his people, *“I will make them strong in the Lord.”* Christians are also in the thick of this battle, so we must be strong and fully armed against this battle. This strength is not ours but is God’s, who *“[worked] his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead”* (1:19). It is God’s resurrection power that gives new life and a new heart and spirit to dead unbelievers (Rom 6:4; Ezk 36:26-27).

How do we then prepare for this battle? No, not with swords and drums, as a hymn tells us, “For not with swords' loud clashing or roll of stirring drums.” Not with casting out demons and repeatedly commanding the devil, “I rebuke you, Satan!” as if we were God and Christ himself (Zec 3:3; Mark 8:32). Some even misuse this text to describe the battle between God’s angelic host against Satan and his evil spirits.

But Paul says that we are in a fight “*against the schemes of the devil*” (v 11). He expands this in the next verse, “*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.*” Who are these that Paul is referring to? These are the spiritual forces of evil led by Satan (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:13, 16; 2:10, 15; 1 Peter 3:22). Paul is not saying that Satan and his evil angels still dwell in heaven, but he’s speaking of the unseen world of Satan and his evil spirits. They work in the spiritual realm to deceive and confuse believers. These forces of evil are also unbelievers whom Satan has blinded so they reject the gospel of Christ and to persecute the church then and now (2 Cor 4:4). Unbelievers “[follow] *the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*” (Eph 2:2). Therefore, Satan works not only in the visible, physical plane, but also in the unseen, spiritual plane.

These rulers did Satan’s bidding: the Pharaoh who enslaved God’s people; the Babylonians who destroyed the temple; Jews who crucified Jesus; and the Romans who martyred Paul and countless other believers. Today, many rulers still do Satan’s work, persecuting Christians around the world. But Paul says that we are not waging physical warfare, but spiritual warfare. And spiritual warfare calls for “*divine power to destroy strongholds... arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.*” Rather, we must “*take every thought captive to obey Christ*” (2 Cor 10:3-5).

How then does God equip us to stand against the evil spiritual forces of the devil? God provides us with his own full armor (v 11). He knows that we are helpless and hopeless against the devil if we fight alone and fit ourselves with our own strength. Most people believe that they can fight their battles in life with their own wisdom, riches and power alone. The whole world relies only on science and technology to fight the deadly Chinese virus. But these too are dependent on God’s will to equip doctors and scientists with advanced medical knowledge.

What does God’s full armor consist of? Paul’s description is that of a fully-armed and fully-equipped Roman soldier. The first part of the armor is the “*belt of truth*” (v 14). This refers to a Roman soldier’s leather undergarment to protect his lower body. Jesus is the Truth who protects us from Satan’s deceptions and false teachings. God is clothed with truth (Isa 11:5), which is the Word of God that sanctifies us, the light that guides our path into righteous lives in this dark, evil world. This leads us into the second part of the armor, the “*breastplate of righteousness*” (v 14). The breastplate protected the soldier’s upper body, including the lungs and heart. The truth of the gospel leads into faith, and faith leads into righteousness and holy living as we obey God’s Word.

The third part of a soldier's armor are *"shoes for your feet"* (v 15), usually a Roman sandal or boot. We must always be ready to proclaim the *"gospel of peace."* Again, Paul uses the prophet Isaiah, *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation"* (Isa 52:7). The gospel is the good news that Christ lived a sinless life, died on the cross, and was raised from the dead to save us from all our sins and reconcile us in peace with God. Each of us who go out telling others this gospel has beautiful feet. The gospel is also the only truth that we proclaim when we fight against our own sinful thoughts, words and deeds, and against others who are lost and wandering in the darkness of sin.

In verse 16, Paul adds to the armor *"the shield of faith."* A Roman soldier wore a shield on his arm to protect himself from swords and arrows which sometimes have flaming tips. Paul uses the metaphor of fiery arrows as *"flaming darts of the evil one,"* Satan. We are to shield ourselves from Satan's deceitful lies which can come as false teachings, false prophecies, and heresies. We defend ourselves from these lies by having the truth of God's Word, by righteous living, and by proclaiming the gospel. All of these are the fruits of faith and trust alone in Christ alone.

Since we are saved by grace through faith alone, Paul next mentions the sixth part of God's armor, the *"helmet of salvation."* A Roman soldier wears a helmet to protect his head. This helmet also has protection for his face and jaw. Once again, Paul takes us back to Isaiah 59:7, where God the Divine Warrior wears a *"helmet of salvation on his head."* We must also protect ourselves from Satan's attacks by being assured by God's true and faithful promises to us in his Word that he will never leave us or forsake us. He preserves us in the faith through the working of the Spirit, so we persevere in the faith under all circumstances.

All of the above-mentioned parts of God's armor are defensive. But now, lastly, Paul includes *"the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"* (v 17). The sword is the Word of God, the basis for all of the above armor of spiritual warfare. The Word is the eternal truth without error or failure. It leads to righteous living, which includes telling our families and friends the gospel of peace through faith in Christ. Through faith, salvation comes to them. Notice also that Paul connects the Word and the Spirit—they work together in saving sinners and in guiding us in our walk with Christ. But on Judgment Day, God will use Christ the Truth and the Word of God, to destroy the wicked. In Isaiah 11:4, God will slay them with *"the rod of his mouth... the breath of his lips."* Christ, who is called *"The Word of God,"* will return from heaven as a Conquering Warrior, and *"from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations"* (Rev 19:13, 15).

"Stand Firm"

To be strong in the Lord and in his might means that we must stand firm in him. Paul uses the word "stand" in this passage four times, so this is an important word. We are to put on the whole armor of God so we *"may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil."* (verse 11), and *"to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm"* (v 13). Christians are like soldiers in a battle line formation who have been commanded by God to hold the line at all costs no matter how

strong the enemy may seem to be. Also, we are not to be passive spectators in this battle. When Paul says, *“and having done all, to stand firm,”* we are to actively strive to withstand the devil’s attack.

Do not give in to the devil’s temptations and lies against seemingly impossible odds, because victory awaits us in the end, as God assures us, *“he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phil 1:6). Again, he promises to *“sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Cor 1:8). Paul says that the day of Christ’s return, the Day of Judgment, will be an “evil day” for all God-hating, God-mocking unbelievers (v 13). Why? Because they will all suffer God’s wrath in eternal hell, and there is no relief or escape. But we will stand firm because God has provided us with his full armor to fight against Satan’s unceasing charges.

“Pray at All Times”

God calls us to be strong in his might and to stand firm against the devil. Finally, in verses 18-20, he calls us to pray at all times. Being strong and standing firm is never enough without prayer, and praying has to be in the Spirit. One cannot be without the other. So Paul writes that we are to *“pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”* What does “praying in the Spirit” mean? Is it being taken to an “altered state of consciousness” by some other mystical spirit? No, it means that when we pray, the Spirit directs our prayers and even puts the words into our lips when we do not know what to pray for. Paul says this in Romans 8:26–27, *“For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words... because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”* Our prayers must be according to God’s will.

Praying in the Spirit also means that the Spirit remakes and softens our hard hearts. He changes our desires,

What are we to pray for? Paul gives us some instructions. We must pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ, including pastors and other church leaders. We must pray that our church, our pastor, and our members will boldly proclaim the gospel of Christ even at the pain of ridicule and harassment. Then, in verses 21-22, Paul points to how we may encourage others by visiting them in their times of grief, loneliness and sufferings, even in prison just as Tychichus did. Lastly, we must pray that our brethren will be blessed with God’s peace, love and grace and with faith.

We are in the midst of a holy war, but not a physical war against our enemies. Our war is of the spiritual kind against the devil and his fallen angels and against those who hate our God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Be strong in the Lord, stand firm, and pray without ceasing. God has armed us with faith, with his Word, and with the Spirit to defeat our enemies. And God will complete our victory at the end of this age.