**The call to stand strong**

Text: Ephesians 6:10-12

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**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 5:8-9; Habakkuk 3:17-19; Ephesians 6:10-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 68b, 420, 300

**Series:** Ephesians (#27)

**Theme:** In the closing section of his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul calls the Ephesian Christians to be strong in the Lord’s strength as they struggle in spiritual warfare against the Devil and his evil forces.

**Proposition:** Stand strong in Christ’s strength as you fight Satan’s evil forces.

**Introduction**

It’s hard to fight an enemy that can’t be seen. The Covid-19 virus is an invisible ‘enemy’ – too small for the naked human eye to perceive (approximately 125 nanometres in diameter). The Devil and other spiritual forces of evil are also invisible to us, not due to small physical size, but to their non-material, supernatural nature. Just because you can’t see something or somebody doesn’t mean they doesn’t exist. God Himself is invisible (1 Tim 1:17).

Our focus, both in this sermon and the next is on **spiritual warfare**; on a conflict which is itself invisible, although the effects of the battle are seen everywhere. You can see from the first word in verse 10, ‘finally’, that the Apostle Paul is beginning the closing section of His letter to the Ephesians.

We’ve already seen in this epistle that God has chosen people like you and me for adoption as sons and daughters in Christ. He has made us alive together with Christ. He joins us to the Body of Christ so that we would be equipped for works of ministry. He has sealed us with the promised Holy Spirit who influences us to live Spirit-filled lives as husbands, wives, parents, children, employees and employers.

We, brothers and sisters, might then expect then that life would go perfectly well for us all; as those who are in Christ. We might anticipate that the Christian life would be without any difficulties in our homes, places of work or anywhere else. Yet we know from experience that troubles, trials and challenges affect many aspects of our lives. Difficulty in live is inescapable. Why is that?

It is because the Christian life is a struggle. American Pastor Warren Wiersbe (1929-2019) helpfully wrote: *It comes as a shock to the new believer that the Christian life is a battleground and not a playground. In my pastoral ministry, I could always tell when a new Christian was starting to mature, because he found himself fighting battles. This was a good sign because, as Spurgeon used to say, “Satan never kicks a dead horse!”* Satan’s hostile forces are opposed to God and His people.

Our text today is a call to **stand strong** against these evil forces. We need to “know our enemy” (as the 5th century BC Chinese General and military strategist Sun Tzu famously wrote in his book ‘The Art of War’). This brings us to our first point.

1. **The enemy**

Most of us know that the coronavirus looks like a round ball with lots of spikes on the surface – the ‘corona’. However, we don’t know that because we’ve actually seen the virus ourselves, but because other people (epidemiologists and virologists) have tools and techniques to be able to see what we, with our naked eyes, cannot.

Similarly, we only know about our enemy because another Person has told us about his existence and nature. God has revealed to us who our enemy is. His name is given in verse 11 – the Devil. In Greek ‘diabolos’ from which we get the English word ‘diabolical’. A strong word which describes cunning evil.

Satan is the chief of the fallen angels who rebelled against God. He is a spiritual being with substantial, but limited power (e.g. Job 1:12). Disguised as a serpent, the Devil tempted Adam and Eve and lied saying “*you will not surely die*” (Gen 3:4). Notice that Paul writes about the ‘*schemes of the devil*’ (v11). The enemy does not ‘fight fair’ but uses trickery and deceit to oppose God and His people. His primary strategy is to alienate humanity from God, who alone is the source of life.

Earlier in this letter we learned that all those who are spiritually dead in their sins are people who follow ‘*the prince of the power of the air*’ (Eph 2:2) – another name for the Devil. They are spiritually blind and are unable (without God’s intervention) to see the light of the gospel of Christ (2 Cor 4:4). Those who are separated from God live ‘*in the futility of their minds*’, being ‘*darkened in their understanding*’ (Eph 4:17-18). One of the Devil’s schemes is to keep people in the dark about the truth so that their distorted view of this world does not match the reality. I’ll give you three examples:

* The idea that this universe originated from the expansion of a tiny concentrated speck of material in a Big Bang is widely believed by many of the sharpest minds on this planet. Yet this makes no sense with respect to the laws of physics. It does not explain the complex designs which we observe, nor does it reveal how the ‘Big Bang’ started or what preceded it.
* The idea that human life begins at birth and not conception results in the aborting of ‘late term’ babies at an age when if they are born to mothers who want them, the medical profession will expend every effort to keep them alive as valued human beings. This makes no sense.
* The idea that human beings are evolving to become better people than they once were does not match the observable reality that people still treat one another with cruelty, violence and oppressive control just as they have throughout human history.

Not only does the Devil alienate people from God by keeping them in the dark about the truth, Satan also schemes to separate people from each other. Paul has already identified some of these mechanisms in this letter. Disharmony and disunity are sown amongst people like us: through ‘deceitful desires’ (Eph 4:22), speaking of falsehood (Eph 4:25) and anger, which gives opportunity to the devil (Eph 4:27).

The primary source of hostile opposition to God and His people is Satan, but he is not the only spiritual evil in existence. The Apostle Paul refers to enemy forces when he writes in verse 12 about “*rulers, authorities, cosmic powers over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*”. This description of the domain of hostile spiritual beings tends to raise many questions in our minds about who these authorities are and how these powers function.

Many of our questions may not have answers revealed in Scripture. We need to be careful not to speculate beyond what God has revealed in His Word. What we do know for certain is that there are formidable hostile spiritual forces in this universe. We are wise if we ‘know our enemy’ because we are in the midst of a battle. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The struggle**

John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was a naval officer during World War II. In 1943, the patrol torpedo boat he commanded was rammed and sunk by an enemy destroyer near the Japanese-held Solomon Islands. Kennedy and a fellow officer swam from one enemy-occupied island to the next until they found some friendly islanders who helped them escape. Years later, Kennedy was regarded as a war hero. Do you know what His response was? "*It was involuntary. They sank my boat*."

So it is with us fellow Christians. We don’t have to decide to go to war. It’s involuntary. The enemy ‘bruised the heal’ of our Lord. We are all conceived in sin (Psalm 51:5).

Jesus spoke to His disciples about the unbelieving world: "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you*” (John 15:18-19). Paul warned Timothy of the reality of the spiritual war in which all believers live this life: “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Tim 3:12).

The Greek word translated ‘wrestle’ in verse 10 literally describes hand–to–hand combat between wrestling athletes, this physical combat in the ancient world was characterized by trickery, cunning and deception. In a wrestling contest each person endeavours to throw the other down and pin him to the ground so that he must submit. Wrestling was known in ancient times for its ferocity which sometimes involved such tactics as a forceful knee to the head and eye gouging. For Paul’s first readers in Ephesus, this wrestling image would not have brought to mind not a childhood play fight, but a fierce violent battle.

So often in life we can see other people as being our ultimate enemies against whom we struggle: a husband, wife, parent, child, employer, employee, brother or sister in Christ. We think that ultimately, they are the problem. The enemy. God reveals a different perspective in His Word. He teaches us the **real root cause** of all conflict in this world when He says through Holy -Spirit-inspired author Paul: “*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 true battle is not physical, but spiritual.

Weapons like fists, swords and guns are of no use in this battle. The spiritual forces of Satan can only be effectively engaged in the spiritual realm, although the effects of the battle are seen all around us in this world, especially in the relationships between people. Why are there so many casualties, so much ‘fall-out’ from this global spiritual struggle? Long ago Chinese General Sun wrote that ‘*if you are ignorant of your enemy and yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril*’.

Those who deny the reality of the spiritual struggle do so either because, as unbelievers, they are dead in their trespasses and sins, being kept blind by the Devil; or because, as believers, they are ignorant of the Devil and his schemes and of their own natural vulnerability. Brothers and sisters be aware of the reality of the spiritual struggle in the midst of which we live our lives. We don’t have to volunteer to find ourselves on the battlefield of this spiritual war.

Know your enemy and yourself. “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). Be watchful, not fearful, because Christ has already won the war. Which brings us to our third point:

1. **The victory**

How does a solider train and prepare for battle? There are two key components:

* Physical and mental fitness and resilience training so that they have the strength to fight in a battle.
* Equipment training so that they know how to use clothing and weapons effectively for both defensive and offensive action.

Similarly, these two components are identified in our text:

* Being strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might
* Putting on the whole armour of God

Today, our focus is on the call to stand strong in Christ’s strength as we fight Satan’s evil forces. The next sermon in this series will focus on Ephesians 6:13-20 and look at the ‘equipment’, the spiritual armour, which the Lord provides for us in our struggle.

As He left the upper room where He had celebrated the first Lord’s Supper with His disciples, Jesus said to them: “*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33b). After Christ’s resurrection, the disciples did suffer much as they went out, as His witnesses ‘*to the end of the earth*’ (Acts 1:8). Even though they, and all Christians since, have struggled in the spiritual battle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, the ultimate victory in this cosmic war has been won by Christ on the cross at Calvary. When we celebrate the sacrament of Lord’s Supper, we remember His death, and we proclaim His victory as we look forward to His return in glory.

Earlier in his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul wrote about ‘*the immeasurable greatness of God’s power towards all who believe*’ (Eph 1:19). This is the divine power which raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in victory ‘*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion*’ (Eph 1:21). It is the strength that the prophet Habakkuk spoke of which enabled him to ‘*tread on my high places*’ (Hab 3:19). When Paul writes in verse 10: “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might*”, this is not a call to be strong in your own strength. The word translated ‘strong’ has the root meaning of being powered from inner strength. We get our English word ‘dynamo’ from the Greek verb in this text. It is in the passive or middle tense and could well be rendered ‘*be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his might*’. It’s clearly not our strength that prepares us for battle and sustains us in spiritual conflict. It is the same divine power that raised Jesus from the dead.

This is not a call to be strong in yourself, to somehow think that you can empower yourself to fight this spiritual war. In fact Christ’s most effective soldiers are those who are most conscious of their own weakness and ineffectiveness, and who rely solely on Him. Paul Himself knew this profound reality. He said to the Corinthians: “*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong*” (2 Cor 12:10). God choses what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor 1:27).

So, how can weak people like you and me be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his might? Well, it’s not ‘rocket science’! It’s not complicated. Yet, some Christians do not stand strong against the Devil and his hostile forces because they ignore the ‘ordinary’ means by which the Lord provides strength for his disciples. Attending worship services like this and the one we plan for this afternoon are one of the means by which we are strengthened by God’s powerful Word (Rom 1:16). The sacrament of Lord’s Supper nourishes us with Christ, strengthening us in Him. Some people have said to me “We’ll it’s not our habit to attend an afternoon worship service”. In light of the need to stand strong in Christ in the midst of the spiritual struggle which all Christians face, why don’t you consider changing your habit?

Hear the call to stand against the schemes of the Devil by being strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Know your enemy, know yourself. Understand the struggle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Do not fear or be anxious, because Christ has already won the great victory over sin and death. Satan is a defeated foe. “*We are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Rom 8:37).

AMEN.