

Be Strong in the Lord

Ephesians 6:10-20

Usually when Leroy are about to go someplace, he will ask what should we wear? Are we going somewhere where we should be dressed formally, or business casual, are we going to play? Is this occasion one that requires special preparation? In its original context, the community of Christians, called "Ephesians," may have lived somewhere in Asia Minor during the first two centuries CE. They were religious minorities in the Roman Empire. Christianity was illegal until 313. Though this letter does not mention a particular persecution, these Christians faced daily harassment and discrimination from their neighbors and possible suppression by the authorities. Scholars believe these Christians in Ephesus may have been taken to worship the emperor at the newly constructed temple of Domitian to test their allegiance. Ephesus was also a thriving commercial city and the cultic center of goddess Artemis. New Christian converts continued to use their Greco-Roman Platonic understand in their new religion. The letter writer portrays the resurrected Christ being "seated...in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." The church is understood to be raised up with Christ in heavenly places (2:6). Between the heavens and the earth, spirits and powers swirl. However, while they grow spiritually into such a dwelling place for God (2:22), Christians must go through transformation. They must shed their former pagan selves and licentious lifestyle (2:3; 4:17-19; 5:3-5), and put on their new selves of godly righteousness and holiness (4:22-24). Christian individuals, households, and

communities become morally exemplary, living in love, forgiveness, and thankfulness.

To live such a Christian life in the predominantly pagan world posed challenges to the "Ephesians." One of the major challenges that these early Christians experienced in their transformation concerned power. Roman civilization was built on militarism. Yet Christians were called not to bear arms against any human agents, because their battle was a spiritual one. Their true enemies were sin, evil, and death, forces that constantly waged war in their inner spirit and at the cosmic level. In this spiritual warfare God in Christ through the Spirit supplies to Christians power and strength (1:19; 3:16), and Christians are "to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" (6:10). **Haruko Nawata Ward**

Paul gave imperatives for living in vv. 10-12. These verses form the climax of the letter. It is no surprise that Paul warns of spiritual battles. This passage follows his exhortations to slaves and masters not to deal with one another according to the schemes of the powers, but with "sincere hearts," honoring Christ. The Ephesians were to be strong against the devil's wiles (4:27; 6:11).

Paul's imperatives to "be strong" in the Lord and "put on" the armor of God expose the inadequacy of any human resources for spiritual battle. The struggle is not with "flesh and blood," but with the powers (6:12). Walter Wink says these powers demand spiritual weaponry.... It is the suprahuman dimension of power in institutions and the cosmos which must be fought, not the mere human agent."

Paul declared Christ's victory over the powers, but Paul is a realist. The Ephesians were in the position of "already/not yet." Already they had

triumphed in Christ, but they were not yet beyond the battle. They wrestle with the powers in the confidence of Christ's triumph.

To be fit for battle and able to be strong in the Lord we are told to equip ourselves with strange armor: truth (belt), righteousness (breastplate), gospel of peace (shoes), faith (shield), salvation (helmet), and Spirit/Word (sword). These weapons are meant for war!

Paul tells us to "stand" four times in verses 11-14. The use of "stand" does not suggest passive resistance. The sword is clearly an offensive weapon. Wink notes that "'stand" (vv. 11, 14) has the sense of the "drawing up a military formation for combat"; and in verse 13 it refers to the triumphant stance of the victor.

We are to be strong in the Lord, and "stand *therefore* (v. 14)...*having girded* yourself with truth and *having put on* breastplate of righteousness...*having shod your feet* in readiness for the gospel...and *having taken* the shield of faith." These words indicate the preparation necessary to heed the imperative to "Stand!"

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm" (v. 13). In view of the fact that the days are evil, Paul instructed the Ephesians that they need to be prudent and aggressively enter the market and challenge the hold of evil in the marketplace of life. Paul was challenging his readers to take the fight to the enemy. We, the church, are to penetrate the powers of darkness as a wedge of light (cf. 5:8-14).

However, it is not all about our power and efforts, we are to "receive/take" (v. 17) the helmet of salvation, knowing we have the victory over the powers; and the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God for combat; "*praying* (v. 18) and *keeping alert*." In this case, we are being called to ongoing prayer and focus

in the face of the continuing battle. The sword of the Spirit is the word of God. Gordon Fee observes that the term used here for "word" emphasizes the word that is spoken, inspired by the Spirit—it is the proclamation, not the book. So, putting on the whole armor of God is linked to evangelism, and prayer is vital in this work. The church has been created to proclaim the mystery of the gospel to the world and to the powers (3:10). The mystery began with Israel as a "peculiar" people (2:12). It also discloses God's plan "to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10); and it is demonstrated in making one people of Jew and Gentile. Anyone making such "offensive" proclamations will be confronted by the powers. It takes courage—and prayer—for anyone publicly to preach the offense of the gospel in a multicultural setting such as Paul's, and in our present day.

Paul tells us to "pray in the Spirit." One thing is clear: the role of the Spirit—praying in the Spirit—is indispensable in confronting the powers. In his struggle with the powers, Paul undoubtedly lifted up groaning (Rom. 8:26), we know he "spoke in tongues," and prayed with his "mind" (1 Cor. 14:15). Paul openly spoke of his weakness and fears in proclaiming the mystery of God. Yet he knew that his proclamation was "a demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:3-4). Evangelism is serious business, and the powers do not give in easily. Prayer—prayer in the Spirit—is crucial.

Paul, an ambassador of the mystery was in chains! Paul, in prison, asks for prayer in the Spirit in his behalf (and the other saints!) that "I may declare the mystery *boldly* as I must" (v. 20). The Ephesians were to take on the enemy by Spirit-empowered proclamation and by Spirit-inspired prayer. Gordon Fee concludes, "Thus, the final word in this letter is a word of evangelism. And prayer in the Spirit is not merely so that God's people will stand against the foe, but so that Paul will be bold to make Christ known." **Aaron L. Uitti**

In the biblical image of the powers and principalities we discover the frequent fallenness of money, sex, fashion, sports, and religion in our culture. We are told that new fortunes are to be made while the military spending boom lasts. We learn that investing in the stocks of companies that market to human vices can earn us higher returns. What should a Christian's 401(k) or 403(b) look like?

The powers with which we fight: segregation, apartheid, fatalism, the Mafia, addiction, bondage of the will, totalitarian states, a celebrity culture of glamorized Bad Girls and Boys, serfdom in the medieval period, attempted bribery of legislatures through large campaign contributions, and genocide. Depersonalization creates a long gray line of faceless folk who think of themselves as no more than a Social Security number. One thinks of Nazi philosophy, unbridled nationalism, violence, hunger, racism, obscenity, addiction, brothels in Mumbai, Detroit, Flint...you name the city... nuclear weapons, and tobacco companies. Can we resolve to live out the Christian life in a hostile environment?

Just one day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany, a pastor preached to a small village congregation with a prophetic vision that "The responsibility of Christians is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the spirit." These Huguenots provided sanctuary for 5,000 Jews. They discovered the Pauline "weapons of the Spirit." We Christians can be awakened to weapons of the Spirit such as prayer (v. 18), Christian truth (v. 14), and the Spirit (v. 17b). These weapons of the Spirit are life giving. From our Christian worship we can ask the Spirit to name the powers that our community faces, and help us to do battle and declares the victory (Col. 1:16; 2:14-15). **Peter Rhea Jones**

The whole armor of God is available for us to dress appropriately for the occasion and help us to stand strong with the Lord.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).