

Be Strong in the Lord

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Ephesians 6:10

We continue now with our final section of Ephesians, Kingdom War. Within this marvelous passage of Scripture, the Apostle Paul concisely describes the spiritual warfare that is raging around us and that we are enmeshed within, whether we know it or not. As we have said, verses 10-13 describe the basic nature of this war, while 14-20 present the armory for our battles. Thus far, we have studied the nature and schemes of our cosmic adversary, and we have discussed the first of Paul's three commands: stand firm. Now that we understand how we are to conduct ourselves against Satan, we will proceed this morning to study our commanded disposition in battle: be strong in the Lord. We will begin by discussing the overall meaning of this command, then we will conclude with a few practicalities for being strong in the Lord.

THE DOCTRINE

The command to be strong in the Lord is not a new one. Joshua and the Israelites who were about to enter the Promised Land were given this call three times in Deuteronomy 31:

And the LORD will give them over to you, and you shall do to them according to the whole commandment that I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."

Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." (vv. 5-8)

And the LORD commissioned Joshua the son of Nun and said, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you." (v. 23)

The command is then repeated four times in Joshua 1 and again in chapter 10:

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... 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. (vv. 6-7, 9)

These commands were especially fitting since they followed Israel's forty-year wandering in the wilderness after they refused to enter the Promised Land.

David gave then this command twice, first to Israelites after the death of Saul and then to Solomon before his own death. Hezekiah also, in 2 Chronicles 32:7, purposely imitates Moses words from Deuteronomy 31 to call upon Judah to stand courageously against the Assyrian forces surrounding them: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him, for there are more with us than with him."

Furthermore, earlier this year, we studied Haggai through whom the LORD commanded Zerubbabel, Joshua the high priest, and the people of Judah to be strong as they resolve to begin construction of the temple again.

As for the New Testament, Paul gave a very familiar set of commands at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (16:13-14).

If we hold up all of these passages together, we begin to glimpse a pattern. First, the command to be strong is often paired with being courageous. Second, it is also often given in preparation of obedience to the LORD, particularly when negative consequences seem certain. Indeed, Wilhelmus a Brakel's definition of spiritual strength is, therefore, thoroughly biblical:

Spiritual strength is an undaunted steadfastness of heart, given by God to His children, whereby they, while entertaining a lively hope of acquiring the promised benefits, overcome fear for all danger and opposition, unyieldingly engage in warfare, and courageously persevere in obedience toward God.¹

This kind of courageous strength is needed by every soldier when entering combat. As most soldiers know, even the surest of missions or battles may go south. Therefore, a resolve to obey requires an acceptance of possible death. A soldier does not weigh his obedience based upon his own personal safety. He trusts that his obedience, even to death, will serve the greater good.

Whether refusing to eat the forbidden fruit, conquering a foreign land, or standing firm against a global superpower, God repeatedly calls His people do be obedient in the face of staggering odds, and He demands obedience. Our obedience, in turn, requires strength. A powerful example of this strong resolve to obey is found in Acts 21. In that chapter, Paul made a stop in Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem, staying in the house of Philip, who was one of the seven original deacons. During his stay, a prophet named Agabus declared that the apostle would be bound by the Jews of Jerusalem and given over to the Gentiles for trial. Luke then records that everyone, including Luke himself, tried to convince Paul to abandon his destination, yet he responded to them all, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). Here we witness Paul's strong resolve even in the face of the tears of his loved ones, which in some cases may be more intimidating than facing a literal army.

As we have noted, Satan will do everything in his power to keep us from obeying God, and one of chief tactics is fear. He will dissuade us from reading the Word for a few minutes during a break at

¹ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service Vol. 3*, 331.

work out of fear of looking like “one of those” Christians. Each Sunday he has successfully a multitude away from a local gathering of believers by sowing fears of judgmental glances. Whenever we resolve to obey the LORD, he is the chief of using our previous failures to awaken a fear of fresh failure, leading us to think that it might just be best not to try at all.

The devil is the master of discouragement, although disguising it as being realistic. But just as courage goes hand-in-hand with strength, discouragement almost inevitably produces weakness. Both war and sports stories know this truth. Films of both are obligated to include a stirring speech by the coach or the king or general. Encouragement, therefore, is not the soft squishy thing that we have made it today. Indeed, today encouragement and affirmation have become virtual synonyms. Biblical encouragement is not, however, about boosting another person’s self-esteem; rather, it is about strengthening a brother or sister in Christ to obey the LORD regardless of the immediate outcome that follows. We, therefore, should be master encouragers, calling one another onward in our pursuit of daily conforming to the image of Christ, even in death.

Yet even as we resolve to be strong and courageous in our obedience to God, we must do so, as Paul commands us, *in the Lord and in the strength of his might*. Here Paul is returning back to many of the words that he piled together to emphasize God’s awesome power in 1:19, when he prayed that we may know “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.” This *great might* of God which raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him above every ruler and authority in the cosmos is now the same *strength of his might* that is now available to us in our present war against Satan and our sin. We are not called, therefore, to muster our own strength for this battle and take courage in our own ability to stand; instead, our strength is found in relying upon the might of our God.

In the Old Testament passages above, this reliance upon the LORD as the source of strength is clear as well. In Deuteronomy 31, Moses encouraged them twice with the promise that “[the LORD] will not leave you or forsake you” (vv. 6, 8). God then told them directly, “I will be with you” (v. 23). The same promise underlines the commands to be strong in Joshua 1: “for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (v. 9). Strengthening his people’s hearts against the great armies of the Assyrians, Hezekiah reminded them, “for there are more with us than with him. With [the king of Assyria] is an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God, to help us and to fight our battles” (2 Chronicles 31:7-8). Finally, consider God’s message through Haggai once more:

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. (Haggai 2:4-5)

The strength of God’s people flows directly from the God’s own strength. As Luther said, “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.” Our courage to steadfastly obey the LORD is not rooted in our own strength; rather, to quote another hymn, “I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.” He is with us both “to help us and to fight our battles.”

HOW TO BE STRONG IN THE LORD

Now that we have basic meaning of verse 10, I would like for us to conclude with four practical means of being strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

Remember That You Serve the Almighty

First, let us remember that we serve the Almighty, the omnipotent God. As we seek to trust in God's strength, we must constantly remind ourselves that His power is far above all other powers, not only separately but also combined. He alone is all-powerful, with whom "all things are possible" (Matthew 19:6). Surrendering over our self-reliance is always frightening, yet when we keep God's goodness and might at the forefront of our minds and hearts, we begin to see yielding to God as the path of wisdom that it is.

Be Disciplined

Building physical strength requires discipline to one degree or another, and the same is true of spiritual strength. If we would be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, we must discipline ourselves in the matters that He has placed before us. We helpfully call many of these actions *spiritual disciplines* because they require discipline and build up our spiritual strength and fitness. Reading, hearing, memorizing, and meditating on the Word, prayer, and fasting are a few examples. Yet we should be clear of how our effort meets our reliance upon God's strength because both must be true. The LORD commands us to be diligent in following His ways, but He also knows that such a task is impossible without His power, so He also calls us to rely upon Him. We work as He is working through us. As we just read in Haggai 2:5, "Work, for I am with you," or again from Hezekiah, "with us is the LORD our God, to help us and to fight our battles."

This is especially true of the spiritual disciplines. They are also referred to as the means of grace, not because we earn grace by them, but because they are pathways of receiving God's grace. Knowing the Scripture, for example, is not a magic formula for securing God's favor. Pharisees likely knew the Old Testament far better than we know either the Old or the New, yet they failed to recognize the embodied Word of God speaking audibly before them. Only God ultimately is able to give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Nevertheless, knowing God's Word is a surer pathway for seeing and hearing the LORD than other actions. God has commanded us to seek Him, and the spiritual disciplines are where He may be found. Likewise, we must be strengthened by His strength for our daily and continuous battle, and through such disciplines, we are both strengthened and receive His strength.

Fight Sloth

Piggybacking onto the previous point, we must also fight against slothfulness, which is the exact opposite of being disciplined. Because of the Fall, atrophy is the default state of the world. Left alone nothing becomes stronger or even remains the same. A house is quickly overtaken by nature whenever repairs are not made, and the lawn is not kept in check. The very ground now fights back against our dominion, just as God promised. Likewise, a lengthy stay in a hospital bed often requires physical therapy to walk again simply because our legs lose their ability to function without actually being used. Our spiritual strength works in the same manner. Like Israel's manna in the wilderness, God's strength is dealt in daily (although sometimes hourly or minute-by-minute) doses. We cannot

grow forsake, even for one day, this command to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Again, this should summon us to live disciplined and diligent lives for the Lord. After all, in warfare, negligence is deadly. Joe Barnard speaks of the benefit of understanding our spiritual conflict by noting:

Once a man understands this, spiritual training will not be viewed as an interesting elective, but as a requirement for survival. He will appreciate that to walk up and down the streets of this world without knowing the Word of God is every bit as reckless as storming an enemy camp unarmed. To skip prayer for a single day is like stepping behind enemy lines without taking the time to put on body armor. Alertness and diligence depend on true perspective. Until a man has clarity, he cannot help but be negligent.²

Fight, therefore, the sloth that comes from viewing this world as being in a state of peace. Shake off the lullabies that Satan so softly sings and be strong in the Lord. Store up God's Word in your heart, while crying out to Him, "Teach me your statutes!" Go to the LORD in prayer as though it were more valuable than the air that you breath.

Be Rooted in Joy

Finally, we must root our strength in the joy of the LORD. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra read the Scriptures to God's people, and the people began to weep as they hear God's Word. However, Nehemiah and Ezra comforted (another word which originally meant to strengthen) the people by saying, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (v. 10).

The joy of the LORD is strength to His people. But how so? Remember that the point of being strong is to obey God and stand against sin and the devil. That is the nature of this war. Each day we are given the choice of submitting to God in obedience or submitting to Satan in sin, and to stand against sin requires strength, the strength of God. Joy factors into this equation by reminding us that obedience and allegiance to God is ultimately for our good. Suffering certainly will come, of that the Scriptures are clear. However, the LORD almost never simply tells us to endure trials because He said so! Instead, He almost always encourages our endurance in the present with reminders of the glories that are to come. In this, Christ serves as our chief example by enduring the cross for the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2). The cross comes first, then glory. Discipline must precede the crown of victory.

The joy of the LORD grounds our hearts in the hope that will not put us to shame (Romans 5:5). Joy in God breaks through sin's only argument: that God is withholding good things from us. Being grounded in the joy of our salvation, we remind ourselves in the midst of sin's temptation that our God withholds no good thing "from those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11). Even if He sends us to our death, we still pray with confidence: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). This kind of satisfaction in God is strength because it robs sin of its foothold in our discontentment. The joy of

² Joe Barnard, *The Way Forward: A Road Map of Spiritual Growth for Men in the 21st Century*, 84-85.

the LORD is our strength because it encourages us to remember that obedience is always worth the price tag, even though we must sell everything we have in order to buy this treasure.

God is for us, and through Christ, God the Spirit is now in us. Although the day is evil and so are our hearts, He will not leave us alone in this fight. He will supply us His very strength. We, however, must root ourselves in His joy, being disciplined in Him and fighting off the pull toward sloth, knowing that the glory to come is worth whatever He calls us to endure in this life.

Be strong, therefore, in the strength of the Lord and in the strength of His might.