

Part 13: The Need to Stand Firm

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Do you have what it takes? Will you make the cut? Can you handle this?

These are all questions that the world will ask you at many places in your life. In school, in relationships, sports, work, we've all encountered places where our performance and ability to endure brought with it two competing realities. Succeed, and get everything you've ever wanted. Fail, and join the long list of those who weren't able to cut it.

Our world understands the need to endure. If I invest in you, you'd better succeed. If I help you, you better not make me regret it. If I hire you, you'd better be able to get the job done.

And the subsequent effect this has on our emotions are two-fold. The first is that it can lead us to arrogance: of course I can get it done. The problem is that if and when we fail, we experience nothing but shame and a challenge to our very identity. The second option is fearful apathy: I know I can't get it done, so I'm not even going to try. Why risk failure when I know I probably can't stack up?

In the workplace and in our relationships these are often the defaults that we wrestle with when it comes to our ability to stand firm and endure some sort of challenge.

In the book of Ephesians Paul is writing to a church, just like ours, preparing us for such a challenge of endurance. This church is in the same dog-eat-dog world that we are in, and they are buffeted by the same weight of these requirements. To help them, he's reminded them of the wonderful reality of their salvation, he has painted for them the beautiful life of the church, helping each other follow Jesus as God's new people. He has held up the wonderful picture of the eternal inheritance and glory which awaits us in heaven. And now he opens his concluding section of his book with the word, "Finally."

In light of all Paul has written, he now begins to ask those same question to us: "Do you have what it takes? Will you make the cut?" But what's unique about Paul's challenge in these remaining verses is that we see on full display how wonderfully unique the gospel is in contrast to our world.

The weight of endurance, the need to stand firm in your faith is far weightier than any job or relationship here on earth. And yet, the gospel call to stand firm brings hope to the weak and humility to the arrogant. This concluding commission of Paul, this wonderful call to endure, is what we are going to be looking at in two parts this week and next week to close out the book of Ephesians.

Paul knows that a life of following Jesus is a life which remains faithful till the end. And because of that he is equipping this church today to be prepared for and to stand up to the many trials which will come our way. What we are going to see this week is the need to stand firm, and next week we are going to see the means to stand firm.

Today we are going to focus on the first four verses of Paul's concluding remarks. And what we are going to see today are three truths: **The strength to stand firm is God himself, The challenge to stand firm is the devil himself, and The call to stand firm is the gospel itself.**

I want to read through our passage today and hopefully you will be able to see these three points even before we circle back to them more closely: **Ephesians 6:10-13**.

Now what follows beginning in verse 14 is a relatively popular passage of scripture often called, "the armor of God." I grew up in the church, and in Sunday school and at VBS we would often recreate this armor during craft time, so much so that it became normal to think this way. In fact I imagine that when Rob read the whole passage a bit earlier what stood out to you, what captivated your mind, was indeed the metaphors of armor: the romantic idea of the sword of the Spirit, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness.

And these metaphors are wildly helpful, which is why I want to spend a whole sermon on them next week. But we must not lose sight of the need for armor. Why does Paul use the analogy of a soldier? Because the Christian life is a life of fighting. It demands effort. It is going to be dangerous and hard.

In other words he needs to first convince us there is a war. In our western world today we are relatively insulated from conflict like this. We appreciate war on TV for history or entertainment sake, we pay money to look at armor behind cases in museums. But for most cultures across history, when the discussion turned to armor, you knew something hard was coming. War.

In these verses Paul is teaching us about the nature of this war by emphasizing three truths about it. The first point we see in this text today is this: **The strength to stand firm is God himself**. Look with me at **Ephesians 6:10-11**.

Now as I sat down to do my work on this text this week, I read verse 10, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," and I fell in love with it. And then I quickly fell out of love with it. And then by the end I fell back in love with it.

I fell in love with it because I want so deeply to be strong in the Lord. Isn't that such a wonderful ideal? There are days in my life where I consider all that God has put in my life, from raising my kids and loving my wife, the weight of pastoral ministry, the large amounts of money we need to not be homeless as a church, and I feel so incredibly weak.

I'm sure you've had those moments too. Where all you want is a bit of air to give you some strength? And I read that verse and just savored it. Until I fully understood what it was saying: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."

And this is where I fell out of love with this verse. I want to be strong in the Lord, but I want it to look like the strength of my might! I want strength in the Lord to look like sin fleeing before me. I want strength in the Lord to look like obedient children and a wife who meets my every need. I want strength in the Lord to look like huge checks being written to the building fund.

But that is not what Paul is saying here. He is calling the church to be strengthened in the Lord, by, in, and through his strong might. Which means this: God's strength, the very strength that I so desperately need, doesn't always look like the strength I think I want. Remember God's kingdom looked more like a mustard seed than a mountain, redemption looked like the cross not a military campaign. It is a humbling desire to want this kind of comfort.

How many times in your life have you thought: "I would be able to endure this if it just got easier! I would be able to stand firm, if I was just stronger!" We think this way because this is what the world tells us. It tells us that if you are going to make it, you better be able to do it on your own. But that's not the gospel. We can't do it on our own. We can't earn our salvation on our own and we can't endure in our salvation on our own.

In fact this is what Paul reminds the church in Galatia of in **Galatians 3:2-3**. Paul's point is that if it was the work of Jesus which saved you, don't you think that work of the Spirit will also endure you? It's like having a father willing to buy you a house, but thinking the same father is unwilling to buy you a cup of coffee.

This idea comforts the weak but challenges the strong. To those in this life who right now feel that you don't need to stand firm, like things are going pretty well, take this sober moment to reflect on your strength.

As we will see in a moment, if your strength is anything less than God, one day your castle of sand will come crashing down. I so badly want God's strength in my life to look like my picture of strength but ultimately that's not trusting in God, that's trusting in myself.

Consider the warning that King Uzziah presents in the Old Testament. Uzziah was a king of Judah and under his rule Judah flourished. He did what was right in God's eyes, he build up the nation, and led reforms. But this success which was given to him by God, ultimately drew his trust away from God. Look at what **2 Chronicles 26:15-16a** says.

Our world wants you to fear weakness, God wants you to fear false strength. I've seen it happen so many times where people come to God for an emotional booster shot, and once they have become strong, they find no more need for God, his word or his church. But that is pride that leads to destruction.

To those on the opposite end of the spectrum, to those who feel only opposition and defeat, look at what God is holding out for you. He is holding out himself and in him is all the strength you need. Look at **Ephesians 6:11**. God wants you to have his armor. Not yours. This is where we can fall back in love with this text right?

There's this wonderful scene in 1 Samuel where David, the shepherd boy is about to go out and fight the giant, Goliath. And in that moment David goes into King Saul's tent and Saul tries to put his armor on David who says, "I can't go to battle in this." Instead he goes out robed in nothing but his trust in God and he conquers.

You see this world will try to sell you armor every day. Some of you will sell everything to get it, some of you will realize that you can never afford the armor of the world. But here Paul offers you the very armor of God by grace. This is what you need. Though it is bathed in a metaphor there is nothing illustrative about this strength. It is as real as God himself.

We need this kind of God. As the old hymn says, may we collectively sing: "Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee." What god makes himself available to his people like our God?

Paul wants us to realize our need for supernatural strength because we have a supernatural enemy. We see this as he continues in **Ephesians 6:12**.

Here we see our second point today: **The challenge to stand firm is the devil himself.**

Paul opens up by saying, we don't fight against flesh and blood. Now that's quite terrifying isn't it? We know how easy it is to see flesh and blood as our only enemy. We're coming out of the bloodiest century in human history. We know the horrors of flesh and blood.

Even more than that, we see how powerful and controlling these non-spiritual forces are over our lives. Since the dawn of the smart phone neuroscientists have been teaming up with app designers and marketing directors to literally hijack your brain.

This unique combination of flesh and blood have discovered something called RPE: reward prediction error encoding. They have found out how dopamine is released in your brain, and their play with the colors of your apps, the timing of your notifications, the sounds and animations on your screen to literally recondition the physiology of your brain.

Meaning this: the reason why Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are all free is because marketers know that they can literally control your consumption patterns via your phone.

There is a famous scene in the film Jaws where one of the sailors is chumming the water and all of a sudden he sees Jaws come up and eat the chum. He is so stunned by the size of the shark that all he can do is walk wide eyed back to the captain and say the famous line, "You're going to need a bigger boat."

When Paul says, "Your battle is not against flesh and blood," he is saying to us, "You're going to need a bigger boat." Paul says, "You can't browse Instagram without longing for the new phone, or new outfit, but you think you can say no to sinful desires?" "You can't make it through church without checking your fantasy football alert on your phone, but you think you can stare down the devil." Your battle is against the schemes of the devil himself.

Now Paul doesn't give an origin story to this villain, but what's important to see is that there is a personal devil. He schemes against you. The "devil" isn't a nick-name for anything evil in this world, though he is the source of all evil in this world.

The devil is a real being, an angel created by God who rebelled against him and led a host of other angels into the world most ill-fated rebellion. I say "ill-fated" because while Satan is much more powerful than us, he is not more powerful than God. In fact he can do nothing apart from God's divine allowance. We see that in the book of Job, God grants Satan permission to test Job, but he also places limits on what Satan can do to Job. One day God will dispatch this devil and his demons with the swiftness of a word.

Yet, as ill-fated as it is, it is still very much a rebellion. God has granted to Satan influence and authority in this world and Satan seeks to work his woe where ever he can. And this devil schemes against you. The apostle Peter says it this way **1 Peter 5:8**.

Do you really understand the weight of what Paul is saying here? More than understanding, Paul wants you to feel the weight. One of most helpful things to look for when reading your Bible are repeated words. Did you see the repeated word in this text: **Ephesians 6:11-12**.

Did you hear it? Did you feel it? Do you feel surrounded? Against the schemes of the devil, against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers, against the spiritual forces in the heavenly places.

Do you realize that one of the hardest battles you will ever have to fight is the battle to stand firm against the schemes and forces of Satan? Just as app developers don't need to steal your wallet so long as they own your mind, so Satan doesn't need to appear visibly if he can influence your heart. And the devil delights in nothing more than steering our hearts away from God.

The battle we face is a battle for our souls. Paul has already warned us against this back in chapter four when he urged us to give no opportunity to the devil.

Now as powerful as the devil is, he is no match for God. Does this text make us overly fearful and obsessed with the devil? No. For look at what John promises us: **1 John 4:4**.

It doesn't make us obsessive, but it does open our eyes to our need to stand firm. We need help against the devil. There is much debate in our country today over the Second Amendment: the right to bear arms. The Second Amendment was written so that the people would be able to, and equipped to protect themselves if the government were to turn into an oppressive and violent force.

And there are millions of dollars and countless hours spent by some to ensure such security. But do we have such a healthy fear as this when it comes to the devil in our life? Do you have a healthy fear of Satan and his schemes? We are in great need for such a perspective.

Our only hope in this world is a Jesus greater than anything we could ever encounter. Satan wages war against us, we ought not to be arrogant. But Jesus makes a way, so we ought not to despair.

Look with me at **Ephesians 6:13**.

Here we see our last point: **The call to stand firm is the gospel itself.**

Maybe you've made it to this point of the message today and you're asking yourself, "Why are we talking about this? What does this really have to do with me? Let's get to the part where we hear about the armor of God and let's finally do something practical!"

But don't rush over verse 13. Yes, we've seen that God is the only sufficient source of strength. Yes, we've seen that Satan and all his lackeys want to lead us away from God. But do you see in verse 13 why this is important?

The reason why God is offering himself to you, the reason why Jesus came to die for sinners, the "why" which drives everything in our lives, is hidden in verse 13. Look at it again: **Ephesians 6:13**.

Here is the tough truth of this text. You might be able to come to church, you might sing songs, you might go to Bible study, you might profess faith in Jesus, you might fund our whole building project, you

might go on a missions trip, you might do wonderful things in wonderful ways in our city but if you fail to stand firm in the faith you have done nothing.

Hear what Jesus says in **Mark 13:13**. Look at Paul's words in **2 Timothy 2:11-12a**. James the brother of Jesus says this, **James 1:12**. Reflecting on a vision of the last days look at what John says, **Revelation 14:12**.

Do you hear the witness of scripture? Without standing firm, without passing this test, without endurance, there is no salvation. You might think the whispers of sin, and the pleasures of this world as trivial and silly moments. But if they continue to erode your ability to stand firm, then you play cheaply with salvation itself.

Look at what the author of Hebrews says: **Hebrews 10:35-39**

Now did you notice the tension in that text? The same author who says "you have need for endurance" is also the same author who says, "you are of those who have faith and preserve their souls."

That seems odd? Are you in need? Or will you persevere? This is where Jesus holds the tension.

Dear believer, you must stand firm. And dear believer, if you are in Jesus, you will stand firm. Look at what Jesus says: **John 10:27-29**.

You see this is the beauty of the gospel. The gospel isn't that life will always be easy. But the gospel is that so long as you cling to Jesus, even as Satan scratches and pulls, Jesus will hold you fast. If this Jesus is your savior, you will take up this call at whatever cost and you will stand firm because Jesus will endure you.

In 1814 an America poet named Francis Scott Key was aboard a British ship as a fleet of British forces sailed up the Chesapeake Bay to focus all of her royal might upon American militia held up in Fort McHenry.

Key knew that the American fort was wildly outmatched by not only the men, but the naval firepower of the British forces. He could do nothing as he watched the British forces bombard, rocket, and cannon the Fort from dusk till dawn.

But that morning, Key looked out and he saw, that the American flag which hung over the fort still stood. It symbolized to him that despite the best efforts of the British navy, the men at Fort McHenry stood firm.

And in a moment he wrote what would later go on to become the Star Spangled Banner which described that symbol of endurance saying it: "gave proof through the night that the flag was still there."

Reflecting on that night several years later Key described his emotion: **"I saw the flag of my country waving over a city – the strength and pride of my native State – a city devoted to plunder and desolation by its assailants. I witnessed the preparation for its assaults, and I saw the array of its enemies as they advanced to the attack. I heard the sound of battle; the noise of the conflict fell upon my listening ear, and told me that “the brave and the free” had met the invaders...Then did I remember that there were gathered around that banner, among its defenders, men who had heard**

and answered the call of their country – from these mountain sides, from this beautiful valley, and from this fair city of my native Country; and though I walked upon a deck surrounded by a hostile fleet, detained as a prisoner, yet was my step firm, and my heart strong, as these recollections came upon me. Through the clouds of war, the stars of that banner still shone in my view, and I saw the discomfited host of its assailants driven back to their ships. Then, in that hour of deliverance and joyful triumph, my heart spoke a question “Does not such a country, and such defenders of their country deserve a song?” With it came an inspiration not to be resisted.”

That firm standing flag proved an inspiration for an entire nation. But the truth was despite that inspiration, all it was, was a symbol. The flag did nothing.

This is why we need to see Jesus. Jesus is more than a symbol of endurance. He is the means of it. When Jesus was raised upon the cross, he took the worst that the devil had. He took the scorn of Satan, the sins of man, the pain of humanity and the rejection of God. But in the dawning of the third day, he gave proof through the night.

You see this world will throw everything at you to convince you of strengths and securities apart from Jesus. But Jesus proves everything he provides. What is there to fear which Jesus has not already defeated?

Death itself was nothing for him. Don't you think he can endure you even if that resistance brings you to the doorway of death?

Dear church, this armor of God which is to follow is nothing if we do not see the savior of God. For faith, righteousness, God's word, and the gospel itself is nothing apart from this enduring and firm footed Jesus.

The wonderful news of the gospel is that you don't have what it takes but Jesus does. And in those moments where you feel all is lost to sin and Satan we can do more than gaze upon the symbol of our faith, but instead we can say: greater is he who is in me than he who is in the world.

So won't you look at this war that Paul is describing, and be resolved, before we ever get to the armor, that Jesus is calling you to endure a little bit more. When the battle seems lost, look to this Jesus and stand firm. When the nations rage, trust that this stronghold will not fail.

In closing I want to consider the words from a Martin Luther hymn, one I believe we sang last week:

“Did we in our own strength confide
our striving would be losing
were not the right man on our side
the man of God's own choosing.
You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is he.
The Lord of Hosts his name
from age to age the same.
And he must win the battle.”

This Jesus will win the battle, will you stand firm in him even when it demands everything?