

**“A Call to Arms”**  
**Ephesians 6:10-20**  
**February 14, 2021**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

As we pursue the church’s mission to lift up Jesus and make disciples for him, we can expect to encounter opposition. We are like the Israelites building the wall in Nehemiah’s day, with half of them working on the construction project and the other half armed for battle and standing as guards (Neh. 4:16). And those transporting construction materials used one hand for carrying their burden and the other to carry a sword (4:17). Since our enemy is far more powerful than are we, we are going to need some outside help. The first verse of today’s passage assures us that we have such help as it encourages us to **“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”** (v. 10). He has won the battle already, and equipped us for all we need to stand, fight and win.

The opening word of our text is an important one. It is translated “Finally” in our text, as if Paul is announcing that he is coming to the end of his letter. In his excellent commentary on Ephesians, our own Frank Thielman recommends a different translation, “From now on.” The idea is that they have been going about their fight with sin and Satan in the wrong way, in their own strength. Paul is now suggesting a different approach. Instead of engaging this battle by calling on their own resources, they should instead face the reality of their weakness and look to God and his strength. That’s what this whole passage is about.

Let me say this differently. Your greatest weapon in the fight against sin and Satan is your weakness, for the simple reason that it is only when we accept our weakness that we look to God for his power. So Paul says to us, “From now on, instead of fighting by reliance on your own strength, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” Here’s an illustration. You wake up at 2:00 a.m. and are having difficulty getting back to sleep. After tossing and turning for an hour you are growing more desperate. Would it help you get to sleep if someone tells you, “You know, you really need to make yourself go to sleep. Remember, your alarm is set for 5:30 and that’s just two and a half hours from now. You’ve got a really big day ahead of you and you need your sleep.” Of course, such a speech would have the opposite effect, making us more anxious and less likely to fall asleep. Falling asleep requires a type of surrender, a giving up of trying to fall asleep. Similarly, you win in your battle against sin and Satan by surrendering your own strength and calling on God’s. That’s the theme of this passage. Let’s look now at how Paul develops that theme.

**I. The Adversary We Fight**

We face a formidable and evil enemy in the person of Satan and his allies. Paul refers to them as “rulers, authorities and cosmic powers over this present darkness.” He says that they are “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The precise meaning of these various categories of evil beings is uncertain. But what is clear is that there is structure and organization among Satan and his minions. There are also strategies or “schemes” that he pursues. We are not unaware of these schemes, because the Bible reveals them to us: lying and accusation. Satan’s lies are focused on the character of God. Just as he lied to Adam and Eve, telling them that God is not good and he is not for them, so he spreads the same lies to us. Jesus called him the “Father of lies” (John 8:44). And he is also the accuser of God’s children, **“who accuses them day and night before our God”** (Rev. 12:10). Satan is not very innovative in his choice of weapons, because he has been using the same ones for millennia. But he is very clever in the way he uses these two weapons.

This is the battle we fight every single day. We fight to remember that God is good and he is for us, and we fight for a clear conscience through the blood of Christ. The realm of this battle is not some exalted spiritual experience, but in the rough and tumble of daily life. Notice that this section follows on the heels of Paul’s instructions about three primary relationships in life: that between a husband and wife, children and parents, and slaves and masters (which is analogous in our day to workplace relationships). It is in these daily, ongoing relationships that the battle with Satan is fought. And notice that Paul uses the word “wrestle” to describe this fight. Wrestling is intense and messy. This is not fighting by use of drones while sitting at a computer terminal.

Paul makes a very important qualification here when he reminds us that our battle is not against flesh and blood. We often get confused about this, with deadly consequences. If you allow yourself to get drawn into fighting the wrong battle, you will lose the true battle. Wendy and I went to a marriage enrichment weekend years ago where the leader directed us to an exercise about this. He asked us to look at our spouse and say these words: “You are not my enemy.” Many spouses in troubled marriages get confused about this, thinking that their main problem is the other person. If you believe that, you are playing into Satan’s hands. Such a focus will keep you from seeing your own problems and will ultimately destroy your marriage.

Paul is not naïve. He knows that there have always been and always will be people who hate the Lord and who hate us. There are people today who are convinced that the main problem in the world today is the existence of Christians. They are against us and will sometimes do great damage to God’s people. But he wants us to see what lies behind that opposition. The deeper truth here is that these opponents of Christianity are also victims of the evil one and his lies. Your fight is not against those with whom you may disagree politically, no matter how misguided that person’s political views may be. Your primary opponent is the father of all lies and the accuser of the brethren.

## II. The Armor We Use

How do we go about fighting our powerful, satanic adversaries? God provides us with all we need in the form of armor that will equip us for this fight. As we take up this armor we will be empowered to **“withstand in the evil day”** (v. 13). Commentators are not all agreed about the meaning of the evil day. I understand it to have a double reference. The Bible speaks of an increase of evil that will happen just prior to the return of Christ. But it also speaks of this entire age as being marked by such evil. In other words, we are currently living in the evil day, though it will assuredly get worse before the end. But I agree also with Calvin who said that it refers to particularly difficult experiences of hardship that arise in the course of the believer’s life. There are times when things are just harder than normal. I think we would all recognize that this past year has been such a time. I told another pastor this week that the past twelve months have been the hardest of my time at Altadena. The unwanted limitations arising from the pandemic have not been easy. Nor have the political divisions in our nation. But what has made these things especially hard is the division they have produced within our church. It has been a hard time for almost all of us. We can be sure that Satan’s evil influence is behind much of this, and we can also be sure that God’s power is adequate to help us to withstand whatever may come.

So we continue to move forward in our mission even though the enemy is strong and the challenges formidable. John Bunyan has a good illustration of this in his classic allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. When Christian reached the Valley of Humiliation, “he espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him,” whose name was Apollyon (one of the biblical names for Satan). “Then did Christian begin to be afraid, and to cast in his mind whether to go back or to stand his ground. But he considered again that he had no armour for his back, and therefore thought, that to turn the back to him might give him greater advantage with ease to pierce him with his darts. Therefore he resolved to venture, and stand his ground.”

Six pieces of armor are specified, which can be divided into two groups. We are instructed to put on the first three, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness and the shoes of gospel readiness. Then we are to take up the fourth one, the shield of faith. The verb changes for the final two pieces to that of receiving. We are to receive the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. I group these six pieces of armor into the familiar categories of faith and its fruit. This language of putting on virtues like a person might put on clothes is common for Paul. The virtues are the result of faith, of trusting Jesus. But there is still the need for being intentional in putting them on.

For the sake of time, I want to mention one from each category. The virtue we are to put on that I want to mention is the first one mentioned, the belt of truth.

The truth mentioned here is not primarily the truth of God's word, because that is mentioned later. Rather, it is the virtue of being truthful people. Truth protects us from the attacks of Satan. I don't think I have to tell you that this virtue is in rather short supply today. Really crazy and completely false conspiracy theories are being spread. Slander has become quite common through social media posts and reposts. Remember that Jesus said Satan was the "father of lies." Falsehood is rooted in our enemy. It is his native language. We are called to be people of truth. I like the way our own catechism, the Westminster Larger Catechism, speaks of this. Question 144 asks, "What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?" That's the commandment forbidding the bearing of false witness. Here's the answer:

The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Though we can't control the untruthfulness of others, we can control our own. The next piece of armor shows us the basis for being men and women of truth.

We are to take up the shield of faith, with which we will be able to extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. He gives emphasis to this one by introducing it with the phrase that many versions translate, "Above all" instead of our translation. Satan is said to hurl "flaming darts" at us. When I think of a dart, I think of that small little piece used in a dartboard game. The word refers to something more threatening, to any projectile used as a weapon: a javelin, arrow or something launched from a catapult. The accusations of Satan are among these. He seeks to bring discouragement and defeat by keeping us in our guilt. We answer him with the shield of faith, the gospel truth that God is for us. A story about Martin Luther illustrates this. When the devil once tried to discourage Luther by making him wallow in guilt as the devil rehearsed his sins, Luther purportedly said, "Think harder, you must have forgotten some." So the devil thought harder and listed more sins. Luther then said to the devil, "Now, with a red pen write over that list, 'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.'" The devil could offer no response. This is the basis of truth for us. We need not fear the truth about ourselves, because Jesus has covered the worst of that truth about our sins.

### **III. The Application We Pursue**

Paul begins this paragraph with our weakness that drives us to the strength of God, and here he applies that expression of weakness in the practical area of prayer. Prayer is when weak people appeal to the power of God. Paul says five things about prayer in these verses. First, we are to pray at all times, simply because in our weakness we need the power of God at all times. Second, we are to pray in the Spirit, which means with the help of the Holy Spirit. Third, we are to stay alert, being mindful always of the dangers we encounter. Fourth, we are to pray with perseverance or zeal. Finally, we are to pray not just for ourselves but for all the saints. Paul is first in line to admit his need for prayer. Here is this great apostle and missionary, not afraid to speak of his weakness. What may seem surprising to us is that he asks prayer for something that we might think he just had naturally—the ability to speak up about the gospel. But Paul asks for boldness that he may do just that.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Are you familiar with the story of Dick Hoyt and his son, Ricky, who is confined to a wheelchair because of his cerebral palsy? Ricky once asked his father if they could run in a race, with Dick pushing his son's wheelchair. His son told him after the race that when they were running, he didn't feel handicapped, though it was his father doing all the work. So Dick decided to begin training in earnest, aiming to compete in triathlons, including some ironman triathlons. He had a special float built for the swimming portion, and he would swim with a rope pulling his son. He had a special bicycle built, with a seat up front for his son, but no pedals since Ricky couldn't pedal. They completed six ironman competitions in this manner. We fight in the same way, depending on our heavenly Father for all the power and strength.

Your greatest weapon as you fight evil is your weakness, as long as your weakness takes you to God instead of to despair. So let me invite you to pursue the mission God has for you in dependence on his strength. And start right where you are, such as Paul encourages in the three relationships he gives instruction about just prior to this section. Satan attacks in these areas because he knows that's where God wants to use us. So use your weakness to take you to God and to faithfulness to his mission for you.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Ephesians 6:10-20**

1. What's been the hardest thing for you over the past twelve months?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Your greatest weapon in the fight against sin and Satan is your weakness, for the simple reason that it is only when we accept our weakness that we look to God for his power"?
3. How might the hardest thing you've experienced in the past twelve months be an opportunity to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (v. 10)?
4. We are not unaware of Satan's schemes, because the Bible informs us of them. He lies about the character of God and he accuses Christians both before God and in our own consciences. Is there anything you have believed about God in the past that you now see was not true?
5. Paul says that we don't battle against flesh and blood but against these evil spiritual beings (v. 12). How might this help us think differently about fellow humans who are opposed to Christianity and Christian values?
6. We are to put on the belt of truth, which is referring to the virtue of being a truthful person. How might this virtue of integrity, honesty and truthfulness help you fight Satan?
7. Read over again the explanation of the duties the Larger Catechism says are required in the ninth commandment. What stands out to you in this list as being most needed in your life?

The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

8. Does a feeling of weakness help or hurt your prayer life? Can you think of examples?