Stand strong and ready in truth

Text: Eph 6:14a

**Scriptures:** 1 Peter 5:5b-11; Genesis 3:1-15; Ephesians 6:10-20

**Songs Chosen:** ‘Behold our God’, [SttL] 69, 119:33-40, 421, 180

Series: Spiritual Warfare (#1)

Theme: Standing against the schemes of the Devil by fastening the belt of truth around you.

Proposition: Confidence in Christ is essential for readiness in spiritual warfare.

**Introduction**

The spiritual realm is invisible to us, yet just because you can’t see something, certainly doesn’t mean that it is not real. At the start of this year, before any of us had even heard the word ‘COVID-19’, the sky over New Zealand turned orange and yet there was no visible cause in our country for this strange phenomenon. The explanation for the orange sky came through Australian news media as they reported on the ferocious summer bushfire season there which resulted in the burning of an estimated 186,000 sq. kms of forest and destroyed almost 6,000 buildings.

Similarly, we cannot see with our own eyes the root promoter of so much evil in the world, although we can see the effects with our eyes in our own lives, the lives of our family, our church, our community, our nation and on the world stage. God has revealed the identity of the enemy of mankind in His Word. The name of this hostile being is given in verse 11 of Ephesians 6: The Devil.

In his fictious book, ‘The Screwtape Letters’, author C.S. Lewis imagines the methods used by the Devil and his angels to lead people astray. Lewis puts these scheming strategies into the form of letters from a senior devil called ‘Screwtape’ to his nephew Wormwood. Screwtape writes: “*the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts*”. The Devil is subtle, deceptive, crafty and sly in his trickery, generally working in the seemingly small events and details of our lives and prompting the question in our minds “*Did God actually say?*” – is His Word really 100% true? Can He be trusted? In the ‘Screwtape Letters”, Lewis reminds us that we live in a spiritual battle field.

This is what Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes to the Ephesian Christians about in the Word of God: “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For 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. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.*” (Eph 6:10-12).

This sermon is the first in a series about spiritual warfare which looks in detail at the whole armour of God. Today we concentrate on the first piece of the spiritual warrior’s equipment: ‘the belt of truth’. But before we begin with this, we will look at our source of power to fight.

1. **Strength for the fight**

A new-born baby cannot stand up – why is that? You could rightly say that they do not know how, nor do they have the balance to stay upright. But even if they had the necessary knowledge and steadiness, they lack the physical strength.to stand. Standing upright requires muscle power and that generally takes at least 9 months to develop in most growing new-born babies. At the other end of life on this earth, we see many people in their 70s, 80s and 90s moving with the aid of a walking stick or a walking frame. They too often lack the physical strength to stand unaided.

Spiritually we are all like a new-born baby or an elderly person who lacks the physical strength to stand unaided. If we are to stand in the spiritual battle in which all people who live on this earth, whether they realise it or not, then we cannot do so in our own strength. What then does it mean to be ‘strong in the Lord’? 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).

When Paul writes in verse 10: “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might*” he is referring to the same divine power which gave life to the dead Christ. 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.

So verse 10 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 therefore rely solely on Him. Paul himself knew this profound reality. He wrote 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). Paul depended not on himself, but on Christ. Dependence is the key to being strong in the Lord. Those who remain standing in the spiritual struggles of this life are those who are dependent on Christ. They are those whose spiritual power comes from the Lord.

How then can you and I increase our dependence on Christ and thereby ‘*be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his might*’? One way is identified in verse 18 by ‘*praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication*’. The word translated ‘supplication’ conveys the idea of need from which arises an entreaty or petition to God, requesting Him to provide what is lacking. Here then is a key truth that anyone who desires to remain strong in the face of the schemes of the Devil must know: acceptance of our own spiritual weakness is the first step towards spiritual strength.

Paul writes theological truth about spiritual warfare to the Ephesians, but he also knew personally the realities of wrestling against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. What do you think was one of the great temptations that the Apostle Paul faced as a very influential leader in the early New Testament church? Can you spot it in these words which Paul writes to the Corinthians (hint: he says it twice!)? “*So* ***to keep me from becoming conceited*** *because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me,* ***to keep me from becoming conceited***” (2 Cor 12:7). To become conceited is to be ‘puffed up with pride’. The original Greek word literally means ‘over-uplifted’.

‘Bucket loads of ink’ have been spilt over the years by Bible scholars and commentators seeking to identify what Paul’s debilitating ‘thorn in the flesh’ was. It could have been physical, emotional, or spiritual. It could have been the very thing you yourself struggle with most – perhaps a troublesome health condition, perhaps depression or anxiety, perhaps same sex attraction, or perhaps pride, perhaps doubt and weakness of faith.

According to God’s perfect purpose, The Bible does not reveal what Paul’s particular affliction was, but it was clearly very troublesome to him. But not only that, it was delivered to him by a satanic messenger. Just as God allowed the Devil to torment Job (Job 1:1-12) so likewise, He allowed evil Satan to trouble Paul for God’s own good and holy purpose. In fact the very evil that the Devil sought to use to weaken Paul was employed by God to provide strength.

Here we see something of the dynamics of our struggle against the spiritual force of evil. Satan schemes to weaken us, but God acts to strengthen us when we experience and recognise our weakness, our spiritual vulnerability and turn to him in prayer and supplication, asking for the strength we need to stand. Joseph understood the schemes of the Devil as he works through human beings to try and undermine God’s good purposes. He said to his brothers who had sinned against him greatly: “*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*” (Gen 50:20).

Joseph knew that he had been strengthened in the Lord in the strength of his might that was why he could stand against the schemes of the Devil. How about you, do you know that your very weakness is your spiritual strength, that is if your dependence is on the Lord?

1. **Readiness for the fight**

Having strong core body muscles is widely recognised as having substantial physical benefits including:

* Being able to easily do everyday tasks like bending down to put your shoes on, or turning to look behind you comfortably.
* On-the-job tasks like lifting and even typing require core muscles.
* Having a healthy back.
* Being able to enjoy sports and other activities.
* Improving balance and stability.
* Enabling you to stand tall and strong.

Just as the core body muscles function like a living corset, pulling the centre of the torso tight and enabling strong movement, so the 1st century Roman soldier’s broad leather belt held the rest of his clothing in place. When they were about to enter battle, these soldiers would tuck their tunic up under the belt so as to leave their legs free and unimpeded for the fight. In Scripture, the loins, represent the seat of power. To ‘crush the loins’ of an enemy is to defeat him (Deut 33:11). “Girding the loins" was always a symbol of readiness to take deliberate personal action in Bible times (e.g. Luke 12:35; 1 Pet 1:13). In the same way that the Roman soldier readied himself by tucking his tunic in his belt.

We find the language of ‘girding up the loins’ in the Old Testament, being used to convey a readiness to do the Lord’s will e.g. in Jeremiah 1:17, the Lord says to His prophet: "*Now, gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all which I command you*” (NAS). “*Now you shall eat it in this manner: with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste-- it is the LORD's Passover*” (Ex 12:11 - NAS). So when Paul writes to the Ephesians: “*Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth*” (v14a), he is talking about being ready to engage in spiritual warfare.

How does being supported in the truth result in a readiness to fight a spiritual battle? Here are some ways:

1. **We truly identify the nature of our enemy** – “*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” (Eph 6:12).* The chief ruler of these evil forces is Devil. He is a spiritual being with substantial, but limited power (e.g. Job 1:12). His name in the Greek language is ‘diabolos’ from which we get the English word ‘diabolical’. This is a strong word which describes cunning evil. The truth is that the Devil, disguised as a serpent, tempted Eve using trickery when he lied to the first woman saying, “*you will not surely die*” (Gen 3:4).
2. **We truly recognise that God is not a liar, a schemer, or a tempter** “*God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire*” (James 1:13-14). God alone is perfectly good and only does good (Ps 119.68).
3. **We truly know that the Devil tempts us to sin.** This is what he did in Eden to Eve and through her to Adam. Adam and Eve yielded to his cunning temptation and they sinned against God. The Devil tempted Christ in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-10). Jesus repelled the Devil because He stood firm, having we could say ‘*fastened on the belt of truth*’ (cf. John 1:14). Jesus did not sin then or at any other time. The Devil tempts people like you and me to sin. Being spiritually strong and stable, supported by the truth, enables us to resist the Devil so that he flees from us (Jam 4:7).
4. **We truly understand the meaning of suffering.** Suffering, pain, grief and loss are an unavoidable, inescapable consequence of living in a fallen world. Suffering may sometimes be a direct result of personal sin (e.g. 1 Cor 11:30), but this is mostly not the cause. God uses our suffering for our spiritual good, working a much bigger plan in our lives and the lives of others than we can fully imagine (ref. Rom 8:28). The Devil craftily uses our suffering to tempt us to doubt the goodness of God, His love, His justice and His sovereign control over all. He schemes against us with thoughts like “If God was truly good, if He really loved you, if He really has the power, He would not let you suffer so much as you are doing now”.
5. **We truly realise that the Devil schemes to divide us from one another in our relationships, especially within our own family and church (e.g. Matt 10:34-36).** Satan schemes to separate people from each other. 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)
6. **We truly comprehend that Satan’s aim in his attacks against Christians is to draw them away from Christ, and in his attacks against non-Christians, to keep them away from Christ.**

These are just six ways in which the ‘belt of truth’ prepares us to be ready for the spiritual battles which we all face. Brothers and sisters, ‘gird up your loins’ with truth so that you can be ready to spiritually stand tall and strong in your struggle against the Devil’s forces of evil.

Friend, know that if you are not firmly supported and held together by the truth you are extremely vulnerable to the Devil’s attacks. His goal is your death. So come to Christ in repentance and faith, have life in Him and be equipped for spiritual warfare with the full armour of God. This spiritual struggle is the greatest trial in the life of any human being, how then can naturally spiritually weak people like you and me have courage as we fight? We’ll find the answer in our third point!

1. **Confidence for the fight**

Military battles are often not won by the physically strongest person or army, but by those who truly believe that they can win. The Lord gave confidence to Joshua before the conquest of the promised land when He said: “*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*” (Josh 1:6-7). Notice that Joshua’s strength came from the Lord as He was ‘held together’ by the truth of God’s commandments, lived out by faith. Joshua had an integrity of character because he was ‘held together’ by a personal certainty and assurance of the truth of what God had said. He has confidence in the Lord. The evidence that he was sure of the truth of God’s Word was that he lived that truth out. He trusted in the Lord’s strength to fight.

David refers to the heart condition of being held together in the truth as having ‘*truth in the inward being*’ (Ps 51:6). When David conquered Goliath his confidence was not in his own skill or in the smooth stone he chose to put into his sling (1 Sam 17:49). He knew that the battle was not his, but the Lord’s (1 Sam 17:47). This knowledge of the truth gave David extraordinary confidence in the face of physical conflict.

Similarly, but to an infinitely greater degree, Jesus faced the battle of the cross with a confidence that came because He is strong and stable in the will of His Heavenly Father. He is full of truth (John 1:14). Jesus knew that when He spoke the truth about His Heavenly Father, the truth about the spiritual condition of all who reject God’s authority and the truth about Himself, He would suffer unto death as a result. The truth was by no means easy for Him to live out – think of His suffering and pain as He loved people who misunderstood Him, rejected Him and finally turned against Him. Think about the anguish and separation of the cross as the man who is Himself truth personified, died an agonisingly slow death. Yet truth gave Jesus the courage and confidence to go all the way to the cross in the greatest spiritual battle ever to be fought and won.

It is because of the truth that Jesus has fully conquered sin and death for everyone who truly turns to Him in repentance and faith that we, brothers and sisters, can have confidence for the fight. As the Apostle Paul puts it “*we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Rom 8:37). What particular truths can we be confident in as we ‘*wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil*’?

1. Christ has already won the ultimate victory over the Devil (John 16:33; 1 Cor 15:57).
2. Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us in all truth (John 16:13).
3. Temptations to sin will come, but God promises to provide the way of escape, so that each one of his children may endure the spiritual battle in which we are tempted to sin. God is never to blame when you and I yield to the Devil (1 Cor 10:13).
4. The armour which God provides is effective in spiritual battle, as long as we put it on! (Eph 6:13).
5. Not one of God’s elect will be lost (John 10:28; 17:12).
6. The spiritual battle which currently rages will not continue forever, the Devil will cease to scheme when Christ returns (Rev 20:14).

When you see the New Zealand sky above you turning orange it might be due to bushfires raging far away across the Tasman Sea in Australia. When you see deceit, destruction and death in this world, know that behind all this, unseen by human eyes is the evil work of Satan who craftily schemes and lies in order to try and keep people from faith in Christ and to try and draw away others who follow Him. {Ultimately, those who fall away from Jesus show by their unbelief that they never really knew the truth in their inward being and that they therefore could not gird up their loins with the belt of truth}.

Remember and believe these key truths about spiritual warfare:

1. The Devil is a real enemy, and we cannot stand against him with anything other than the strength which God provides.
2. To be ready to engage the enemy, you need to have God’s truth supporting you so that you can remain firm and strong.
3. Brother and sister, our confidence in the spiritual struggle comes from Christ who has already won the ultimate victory for you over the Devil.

“*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers {and sisters}, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain*” (1 Cor 15:56).

AMEN.