

## Introduction

Two weeks ago I shared that our “cognitive environment” affects how we read and hear Scripture. That is, most of us are twenty-first century Americans living in a world of great relative prosperity. We see the world through this lens. There are two areas in which our cognitive environment greatly affects how we read Scripture. The first is money. We approach what Scripture says about money and resources very differently than most of the world—and most of history. The second area is the one we’re going to look at today. Our cognitive environment greatly shapes our understanding of spirituality and following Jesus.

We see this in how many choose a church. We tend to look for churches that satisfy *our preferences*, rather than seeking churches that are, first and foremost, faithful to the Lord and his gospel. Often the gospel is a secondary consideration, with music style and the slate of programming available being held as more important. We wouldn’t *say* that, but we tend to judge a church by these things, rather than the church’s faithfulness to the Lord and its commitment to one another. If a church meets our preferences then we may look deeper to the more important things.

Very rarely do we look for a church by examining how the church lives in community together. As I’ve mentioned before, we often see “church” as a thing that is between me and Jesus and you and Jesus and her and Jesus and him and Jesus, only we do this “me and Jesus” thing at the same time and in the same place as others. This makes the gathered assembly an optional event rather than a necessary part of following Christ.

We miss the essential nature of Christian community and its vital importance to our growth and maturation. The truth is without Christian community we cannot grow in our faith and we cannot grow in Christian maturity. This is because God has chosen that his work of sanctification would take place in the church. There is a place for personal spiritual discipline, but God’s plan is for this to take place in the church—in Christian community.

This morning as we wrap up Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we will see Paul’s final instructions to us, and we will see these instructions—obeyed in community—are essential for following Christ. We’re in chapter 6, verse 14.

Eph 6:14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, <sup>19</sup> and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

<sup>21</sup> So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. <sup>22</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts.

<sup>23</sup> Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.

Ephesians 6:14–24

## Stand Therefore

In verse 14 Paul says, “Stand therefore”. The command to stand is based on something he has already written. As Dave shared last week, we are to be strong in the Lord. He asked a simple question:

We have available the unlimited strength of God. So why do I want to do it on my own?

Dave Vermilye

There is something in us that wants everything to be about us, to be based entirely in what we do, yet each one of us fears that it actually is. When things go wrong, we think it makes sense, for we haven’t been doing all that well, have we? And when things go right, deep down we wonder if it is a reward for our faithfulness.

The command for us to stand or to engage in this spiritual battle is based entirely on who God is and what he has done. We first sit in the truth of what God has done for us in Christ through his Spirit. Then as we sit in this truth we must walk in it. We must live lives that demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel. It is only by both sitting and walking in this truth that we are able to stand in it as well.

The command to stand is based on his instruction in verse 10: be strong in the Lord. This is passive, as Dave pointed out, indicating the actual ability to do so does not come from within. It is *the unlimited strength of God* that enables us to stand. *We* must stand, but we can only do so in the strength God provides. As Paul so often does in this letter, here he challenges both the ancient culture in which he lived and our culture today. In verse 10 he writes, “Finally, *be strong in the Lord*—not in yourselves. Clinton Arnold explains:

Western readers might be conditioned to miss the fact that Paul is calling his readers to a relationship of dependence and not urging them to draw on their own internal fortitude and strength. “In the Lord” (*ἐν κυρίῳ*) clarifies that believers need to draw on divine power.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

Part of the problem is the gospel is often presented in a way that begins with the words “if you”—at least conceptually—but as I’ve said countless times, the gospel of Jesus isn’t “if you” but “Christ has”. Sometimes I feel really repetitive on this. We are conditioned to look within, to seek some inner fortitude that will enable us to get through the day. We

think that Jesus did enough to get us started on the journey of faith, and we may even say he did the hard part, but then we place the burden on ourselves, as if Jesus saves you *initially* but you have to *maintain* that salvation. If any part of salvation is based on us or our performance, each one of us is lost.

We often live as though Paul wrote to the Philippians, “He who began a good work in you *will help you bring it to completion*”. That’s not what he wrote! The one who began the work in you is the one who will bring it to completion. Salvation begins and ends with the Lord Jesus. Our part in it is a response to who he is and to what he has done.

Again, I often feel really repetitive on this point. I’ll make a promise to you, though: if you and I ever get to the point where we truly believe this and no longer act as though our salvation were dependent on us or on our performance, then I’ll stop reminding us. So, in September when I’m back up here to preach, I’ll remind us all yet again.

The gospel of Jesus is a proclamation of the victory of Christ, not a formula for how one gets to go to heaven. It is *not* “if you”, but “Christ has”. If your response to the proclamation of what Christ has done is faith in him, I have wonderful news *for you*.

We *respond* by standing. God has done something, and we respond to what he has done by standing and engaging in the spiritual battle. The battle is a spiritual battle, which means no physical being is our enemy—even when our real enemy uses flesh and blood people as pawns. Because our enemy is spiritual, our warfare must be spiritual and as Clinton Arnold pointed out, we miss Paul’s emphasis on “a relationship of dependence”. The dependence is not only a dependence on God.

The truth is ancient soldiers could not put on their armor alone. They had to help one another. As each piece was put on there were adjustments that needed to be made to the fit and every time soldiers got suited up, they had to help each other so that their armor was fitted properly and did not hinder their movement. In other words, putting on armor is a community affair.

All the verbs are plural. The church in Ephesus must be strong in the Lord. The church in Ephesus must take up the whole armor of God. The church in Ephesus must stand therefore, *together*. You cannot get suited up and charge into battle by yourself. There is the necessary dependence on each other as the body of Christ.

## **Keep Alert**

Paul goes into some detail about the armor of God, though he does not list the entire panoply. Remember that armor is a metaphor and he need not indicate each individual piece of armor. His point is we must be fully equipped for the battle, and then he highlights certain pieces of armor.

Christians are to stand, “having fastened on the belt of truth”. The truth he’s referring to is the truth he spelled out in the first three chapters. There he told them over and over what God in Christ has done. He tells them again and again who they are in Christ, how the Lord has ensured their eternal salvation and their ongoing experience of God in Christ through his Spirit. This truth they have fastened on is the truth of God.

It isn’t the truth about the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics. It isn’t the truth about this candidate’s position or that candidate’s promises. It isn’t the truth about economic

policy. It is the truth of God in Christ—and only the truth of God in Christ—in which we must stand.

They also have put on the “breastplate of righteousness”. This isn’t their righteousness, but the righteousness that is granted them. He told them earlier they have been created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. They must *wear* this reality. They must embrace their identity in Christ.

Their shoes are the gospel of peace. “Shoes” implies a readiness to proclaim the gospel, both to others and to one’s self. Remember, this is the truth we must sit in before we can walk and before we can stand. This is God’s armor given to us, and his armor is his gospel.

In everything they must take up the shield of faith. Whenever I hear the word “shield” my mind conjures up a specific type of shield, and in this it’s the wrong one. If you are at all like me you’re thinking of a shield like the clipeus. This is a small, usually round shield used in hand-to-hand combat. As the enemy attacks, you block his sword with your shield and then you counterattack with your sword. These shields, however, are not very effective against arrows—and nowhere does Paul suggest we wage hand-to-hand combat, for our enemy is not flesh and blood. Instead, Paul is thinking of the scutum shield.

These were somewhat large shields that were used during arrow attacks. He specifically mentions “flaming darts”. These were not large, heavy arrows intending to penetrate. Rather, they were often hollow and filled with a burning substance. Rather than pierce soldiers, they would hit them and the flammable substance would get all over them and burn them to death. Scuta were covered in animal hides and then painted. Roman soldiers could form an incredibly strong protective barrier, keeping them safe from the burning arrows. Soldiers would simply kneel behind their scuta and wait until the enemy ran out of arrows.

What protects the Ephesian church from this sort of attack is faith. God himself protects them from the enemy. They must hold to their faith no matter how vicious the attack. Faith extinguishes the enemy’s arrows and protects believers.

They also have the helmet of salvation. Remember that salvation is not really a destiny, but is eternal life—and eternal life begins *now*. The helmet of salvation is the present experience of eternal life. It is life in Christ. This is God’s armor that protects! In his first letter the apostle Peter explains that God “has caused us to be born again” and then says this:

<sup>1 Pet 1:5</sup> who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:5

God is the one who began a good work, and God is the one who guards us *through faith*. Salvation is God’s armor!

Further, we have the sword of the Spirit. This is an offensive weapon. Everything else has been defensive, focused on protection. Notice what the only offensive weapon is: God’s word. It isn’t political power. It isn’t the power of a boycott. It isn’t influence. It isn’t a Congressional majority. It isn’t a Supreme Court that affirms Christian ethics. The only offensive weapon by which we stand in the battle is the word of God.

What is Scripture? Scripture is the written record of the revelation of Christ. This is why Jesus could say that all that Moses wrote and all that the Prophets wrote and even

the Psalms were ultimately about him. They were pointing to him. The entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures were revealing the Lord Jesus. This revelation culminated in God becoming man and dwelling among us, living a faithful life, dying an unjust death for his people, and then conquering death by rising from it.

Of course the entire New Testament is also about the Lord Jesus. All of Scripture is the written record of the revelation of Jesus, and is the only offensive weapon we have. Again, notice that a snarky Facebook retort is not the sword of the Spirit. A blast on social media is not the means God has given us to fight the battle. Proclaiming Scripture, which necessary means preaching Christ and him crucified, is the only offensive weapon God has given us.

## **Fiery Darts**

Earlier I shared a Clinton Arnold quote in which he points out how modern Western readers miss Paul's emphasis on our interdependence. We also miss the real weight of the fiery darts he mentioned. We began this series in Ephesians by spending three weeks in the book of Acts. Luke records for us Paul's activity in the city of Ephesus.

As he was traveling, he came to the city of Ephesus. It was the fourth largest city in the Roman empire, with a population of about 250,000—that's more than the city of Grand Rapids today! Ephesus was the official government seat for all of Asia Minor and was a huge center for Artemis worship. The Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It also functioned as a bank, which brought incredible wealth to the area. It was a dark place of magic and great superstition.

Paul shows up one day and starts proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Soon the Jewish synagogue ran him out so he rented the Hall of Tyrannus and preached there daily for two years. Around that time some Jewish exorcists tried to claim the name of Jesus and were themselves harmed by the evil spirit they tried to cast out but were unable to cast out. In response to them getting beaten badly by the demon many believers finally brought out their expensive books of magic and burned them publicly, severing their ties to their former way of life.

The value of these books came to 50,000 pieces of silver—about nine-million dollars. As a result of Paul's faithful preaching and the faithful response of believers, fewer people were buying the silver idols made by those connected to Artemis and her temple. Paul didn't call for a boycott. He preached Jesus, and the response of the people was to stop wasting money on idols. If you recall the story you know this resulted in a massive riot. The concern was Artemis would stop being honored. The real concern was their income might continue to decline, and you don't mess with someone's true idol.

This letter was written a few years after this. The memory of the riot and the precarious position the Christians in Ephesus were in remained. Their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, which meant they did not worship the idols of their culture, deeply angered people. In a world of many gods and incredible "tolerance" for worshiping other gods, the failure of Christians to worship Artemis and engage in magic caused the general public to despise them. When Paul spoke of faith being a shield against fiery darts, they understood his real reference.

Fritz Graf, who is a Classics professor at a college in Ohio, wrote a journal article titled, "An Oracle against Pestilence from a Western Anatolian Town". Anatolia is another name

for Asia Minor. He's quoting from the oracle about avoiding trouble.

[...For help, you have to look to] Artemis with the golden quiver...Put her up in a temple, full of joy: she will provide deliverance from your affliction and will dissolve the poison of pestilence, which destroys men, and will melt down with her flame-bearing torches in nightly fire the kneaded works of wax, the signs of the evil art of a sorcerer. But when you have performed for the goddess my decrees, worship with hymns the shooter of arrows, the irresistible straight shooting one...If you should not fulfill the rites, then you will pay the penalty of fire.

Fritz Graf, "An Oracle against Pestilence from a Western Anatolian Town", *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik*, vol. 92, 1992, pp. 267–79

In the ancient world religion was limited to fulfilling one's duties by the proper performance of rituals. The oracle says to put her up in a temple and she will deliver the worshiper from affliction. It goes on to say when the worshiper performs properly for the goddess the worshiper must then worship her with hymns. If one fails to fulfill the rites, notice the penalty: the penalty of fire.

Artemis was often depicted with a bow and arrows. She was "the straight shooter", and the oracle doesn't mean with words. She was literally accurate with her bow. If you failed to worship her through the right rituals and if you failed to support her in her temple the penalty was her fiery arrows would destroy you.

We hear this and we immediately recognize that Artemis wasn't real. She was a lump of rock, likely a meteorite that landed in or near Ephesus, and was fashioned into an idol. Then a massive temple was built up around her. She had no real fiery darts to attack anyone. Remember, however, when Paul said "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", these are real enemies even if they are not physical. The fiery darts, then, are not physical.

When the city rioted in Acts 19, they were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" These real flesh and blood people were being stirred up by spiritual forces of evil against Paul. They were not his enemies but were very real pawns being used against him. They wanted to kill Paul.

Years later Paul's life would be taken from him. After making it to Spain and then arriving back in Rome he was arrested again and was later beheaded. Even though the flesh and blood pawns of the evil one did, in fact, harm him, not a single ruler or authority or cosmic power or spiritual force of evil laid a finger on him. The fiery darts of the enemy could not land on Paul.

## **Corporate Warfare**

In verse 18 Paul tells them to be praying at all times in the Spirit. They are to keep alert with all perseverance. They are to live in full awareness of the ever-present reality of spiritual hostility toward God and his people, and the primary means Paul gives them is prayer. Prayer is how they wear their armor. They put on the belt of truth and the breastplate of

righteousness and the shoes of the gospel and the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit through prayer: “praying at all times in the Spirit”. They must therefore keep alert and be aware of the ongoing battle around them.

The problem here is we want to personalize this. We want to make this something you do as an individual, and that is not at all what Paul says! We have one offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, which is Scripture. We have prayer, which is how we access this armor of God. Paul is not telling us to get up early in the morning and have our quiet time. By all means, get up early and have your quiet time; it’s a great spiritual discipline, yet this is not what Paul is saying here—or anywhere else!

Many of you may recall the children’s song that tells us, “Read your Bible and pray every day and you’ll grow grow grow”. We want to personalize this and make this about what we as individuals do, but following Jesus is something we must do in community.

When Jesus teaches about prayer, he mentions praying privately in a room with the door shut, but what is his point? Is he actually telling us to pray privately by ourselves? No! He’s actually saying to pray in a manner that isn’t meant to impress others! Look at what he says in Matthew’s Gospel.

Mt 6:5 And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread, <sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Matthew 6:5–13

What is his point? He says to not pray like the hypocrites pray, *which is to be seen by others*. The right way to pray, he says, is *to not pray to be seen by others*. He doesn’t mean here to literally go into a room and close the door. If that’s what he meant we could never pray in the presence of others because they would see us praying. He clearly doesn’t mean that because of the example of prayer he gives us!

Notice what he says. We must pray to *our* Father, not *my* Father. We pray that God would give *our* daily bread, not *my* daily bread. We ask him to forgive *our* debts, not *my* debts. We ask him to deliver *us* from evil, not *me* from evil.

You can’t tell in English but Jesus switches number to emphasize his point. He says when y’all pray, y’all shouldn’t pray like the hypocrites pray. Instead, y’all should pray as if you were all alone before the Lord, so that you—the individual—would not be tempted to pray so as to impress others *who are with you*. How do I know they’re with you? “When y’all pray, don’t pray like the hypocrites, but when y’all pray, y’all should pray like this” and then he includes a bunch of plural pronouns.

Prayer is a gift given to us that unlocks the power of God for spiritual warfare. Did you catch the end of the Lord’s prayer? “Deliver us from evil.” In our text Paul tells us to be praying at all times in the Spirit, and he says to pray “for all the saints”. In our final Clinton Arnold quote for this series, he makes this very point.

Paul wants the community to engage in this kind of prayer “for all the saints” (*περὶ πάντων τῶν ἁγίων*). This expression underlines the expansive focus of prayer within the community, but it also points to the corporate nature of spiritual warfare. If prayer is foundational to the deployment of all the armor, then it is not simply a matter of individuals praying for themselves privately, but of Christians arming each other through prayer. Paul apparently wants believers to feel a responsibility to pray for each other so that they can stand with purity and integrity before God by resisting the varied attacks of the evil one.

This corporate emphasis is in line with Paul’s overall vision of the functioning of the body (4:7–16).

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

## Application

Spiritual warfare is a community activity. No one goes to war alone. No follower of Jesus is the hero in the movie who through his great training and skills, through his firm resolve, can go to war all by himself—and be victorious. There’s no Rambo in the kingdom of God. There’s no John McClain, no Bryan Mills—you know, the guy who said, “...I have a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you.” That’s not how we fight in God’s kingdom. We don’t charge into battle and take on the enemy alone.

Did you notice that Paul ends his letter with a prayer request? He, the mighty apostle of our Lord, the greatest church planter the world has ever seen, needed prayer! When he asks them to pray that words may be given to him and that he may proclaim those words boldly, do you ever wonder *why* he asks these things? Could it be that he often found himself at a loss for words, unsure of what to say or how to say it? Could it be that he, the holy apostle, sometimes felt weak and timid and *needed prayer* in order to speak boldly?

We have this idea of Paul as this great ambassador for Christ—and he was! He calls himself “an ambassador in chains”. He was in prison when he wrote this. We tend to think of him always boldly proclaiming the gospel while staring death in the face. We have this vision of the apostle as a man unafraid to die, unafraid to look the emperor in the face and declare without fear, *Jesus is Lord*. Paul knew that Caesar was said to be lord and for him to confess “Jesus is Lord” necessarily means Caesar is not. You don’t think that caused a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach just thinking about?

Paul was in prison, Luke tells us, for two whole years. He ended the book of Acts this way:

Acts 28:30 He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, <sup>31</sup> proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Acts 28:30–31



How did Paul go from asking for prayer for boldness to actually proclaiming the gospel boldly? *The church in Ephesus went to battle on his behalf!* The Christians in Rome were praying for him. The churches in Macedonia and Achaia and Galatia and Asia Minor were praying for him. The churches in Illyricum and Syria and Cilicia and Cyprus—all the Roman provinces where Paul planted churches—were praying for him. Without the churches sitting in the truth of God in Christ, and without the churches walking in that truth, they could not have stood with Paul in the battle, engaging in warfare on his behalf through prayer.

Prayer is what unlocks the armor. Prayer is how we help one another put on that armor. This is because prayer inherently points us away from ourselves and toward God and his promises. Prayer reminds us who God is and what he has done—and what he promises yet to do. Prayer is our means of access to God's power.

Throughout this letter Paul has mixed metaphors. We saw this last week when he said to put on the armor of God because we're in a wrestling match. We've called this series, "Sit, Walk, Stand", because this is how Paul organizes the letter. We are to sit in the truth of God in Christ. In light of who God is and what he has done for us, we are to walk in that truth by living transformed lives. Only when we sit and walk in this truth are we able to stand.

If I may add to this, the only way we can stand is by kneeling. Paul Miller helpfully clarifies this for us.

The battle to pray is not mainly a battle against prayerlessness but a battle against discouragement, cynicism, and unbelief.

Paul Miller, "A Praying Church"

When we pray, we enter into a spiritual battle that has already been decided. We experience skirmishes on the fringe, but the outcome of the battle is never in doubt, for Christ is victorious.