



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Be Strong in the Lord

Ephesians 6:10-24

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May 17, 2026

We've made it all the way to the end of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. For just over five chapters, Paul's been explaining how the church is God's means of taking what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection and turning it into God's new creation. He's shown us how, in Jesus and the Spirit, he's given us back the vocation that Adam rejected. We've been restored to our position as stewards of God's presence and God's wisdom and God's glory for the sake of the world. Even more than that, as Adam was placed in God's garden-temple, through the gift of God's indwelling Spirit, you and I—the church—have now become God's temple. And as Jesus has been raised from death to go be the new Adam, so in him and in the power of the Spirit, you and I are now called to put off the old, corrupt, lie-based way of being human and to put on the new humanity exemplified by Jesus. And if we will be faithful to be fruitful and to multiply—whether by having our own children and raising them in the wisdom of the Lord or through our proclamation and living out of the gospel that brings others to the Messiah—Brother and Sisters, the temple will grow and grow and grow, carrying God's presence to the ends of the earth, spreading his wisdom—the way of new creation and the way of truly being human—to the ends of the earth, until God's glory covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

And having established that this is what the church is and that this is what our mission is, he shifted in Chapters 3-5 to the *how* of living out this new creation, to the *how* of putting off the

old and putting on the new. Don't listen to the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Speak the truth and live the truth of God's new creation. Put aside anger and wrath, and start living out love and grace and patience and mercy with all humility—just like Jesus. And don't believe the world's lies about sex and money and power. Be holy as God is holy and trust in his goodness and faithfulness. In other words, as I said last week, stop trying to write your own story. You're bad at it. We all are. God did not design us with the capacity to write our stories for ourselves (or to be gods, as Genesis put it). Instead, trust in the God who gave his own son as a sacrifice for our sins, to set us to rights at such a great cost, and *live the story he has written for us*. And the world will take note. Live God's story, and you will challenge the lies of the world. Live the story in which Jesus is Lord, proclaim that story and seeing that glimpse of new creation, of redemption and renewal, of mercy and grace people around us will believe. But, too, live the story in which Jesus is Lord and you will challenge the Caesars of this world. Live the story in which God is good and faithful and generous, and you will challenge the greedy, grasping lies of the world. And the world, the flesh, and the devil will push back. Or as Paul puts in Chapter 6, the principalities and powers. They've lost, but they don't want to admit it. They don't like to be challenged. And this is where Paul picks up in Ephesians 6:10 with his final bit of wisdom for the Ephesians and for us. [This is page 1163 in the pew Bibles.]

“What else is there to say? Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, then you will be able to stand firm against the devil's schemes. The warfare we're engaged in, you see, is not against flesh and blood. It's against principalities, against the powers that rule the world in this dark age, against the wicked spiritual elements in the heavenly places.”

Brothers and Sisters, know who your enemy is. When things, when people, when systems push back against the gospel. When we try to bring new creation to the world, when we try to live out the new way of being human we have in Jesus and the Spirit, we will experience opposition. And it's critical we stand firm and fight back. But Paul stresses here: Know your enemy. Because fighting the wrong enemy isn't going to win us anything.

Paul knew this well. Consider that he'd been a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the party that traced its roots back to the Maccabean revolt two hundred years earlier, when the Jews rose up and threw off their pagan Greek overlords. Paul—like most of his fellow Jews—grew up knowing that the enemies of God's people were the pagans: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek, the Romans. In a couple of decades it would happen again in the Judean volt of A.D. 70 and then again in the bar Kochba revolt in A.D. 132. Neither of those revolts ended well for the Jews.

And when the Jews revolted, they went into battle with passages like Isaiah 11 in mind: The shoot from the stump of Jesse would come, full of wisdom and justice. “He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (Isaiah 11:4-5) But they added their spin to the scriptures. The community at Qumran—the people responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls—the saw it this way:

“With your sceptre may you lay waste the earth. With the breath of your lips may you kill the wicked...May justice be the belt of your loins, and loyalty the belt of your hips. May he make your horns of iron and your hoofs of bronze. May you gore like a bull...and may you trample the nations like mud...For God has raised you to a sceptre for the rulers before you...all nations shall serve you, and

he will make you strong by his holy name, so that you will be like a lion.”¹

You can hear Isaiah in that, but then here the warrior girds himself up for battle, to trample the nations like mud. He gores the nations like an ox and ravages them like a lion. The picture begins with Isaiah, but it gets lost along the way. In Isaiah 11 the Messiah’s warfare ends not with a goring ox or a lion tearing flesh, but with the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion laying down together at peace and one like a little child leading them into a renewed creation where the lion eats straw like an ox.

I fear we fall into the same trap. Jesus said to his disciples: “Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more they can do. I will show you who to fear: fear the one who starts by killing and then has the right to throw people into Gehenna. Yes, let me tell you, that’s the one to fear! (Luke 12:4-5)

Brothers and Sisters, God had always urged his people to stand firm and to put up a fight, but our enemy, as Paul says here isn’t flesh and blood. It’s not the people, however wicked they may be. It’s the lies the devil whispers—or sometimes shouts—into our world. It’s been that way from the beginning when Adam and Eve believed the first of his lies. It’s the lie that we can write our own stories better than God can. It’s the lie that security or power is to be found in money or in politics or in sex or in education or in all the other things to which we look that are not God—all the things that use and abuse and manipulate and exploit others for our benefit. It’s the lie that we can fight the gospel battle with bullets or with politics or with violence. Paul’s people talked about principalities and powers—sort of angelic beings whom

God had created and appointed to oversee the nations, but who had fallen under the power of the devil’s lies. That’s how they thought. I don’t know if that’s how it really is, but there are powers—political, economic, sexual, intellectual—that perpetuate the devil’s lies and keep us in the dark, keep us stomping on each other, keep us at each other’s throats, keep us seeing everyone else as the enemy so that we never stop to think that the real problem is the devil and his lies.

So Paul reminds us. The enemy is not flesh and blood. Yes, other people enforce those systems. Caesar believed the lie that he was the world’s lord. And his soldiers believed that lie too, when they arrested Christians and threw them to the lions. But they were not the enemy; the lie was. It still is. They needed deliverance from it just like we do. The enemy isn’t Mark Carney or Donald Trump. The enemy isn’t greedy bankers or crooked businessmen or the people who run giant pornography websites. It’s not the abortionist or the therapist pushing gender ideology. They’re flesh and blood. They bought the lie. They need a gospel rescue just like we do. And so Paul warns us, yes, there’s a battle, put on the armour of God, and stand firm, but know your enemy. Take your battle to the devil and the principalities and powers that perpetuate the lies. Don’t shoot their prisoners when what their prisoners need is to know the truth, the wisdom of God. Brothers and Sisters, to fight them, to take the battle to flesh and blood, is just to fall prey to another lie of the real enemy. Paul says that weird thing in verse 12, that these wicked spiritual elements are in the heavenly places, but I think his point there is that—as he said back in Chapter 2, *we* are seated in the heavenly places with the Messiah. In his death and resurrection, Jesus won the decisive victory and now he’s enlisted us, not to just sit in the church and be holy until he returns, but to be the new humanity who takes his new

creation to the ends of the earth and, along the way, confronts the lies and the systems and powers that perpetuate them and declares that they have been defeated. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “he must go on reigning until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” Brother and Sisters, the church is his means to bring that day. (See, this has turned out to be an Ascension sermon after all!)

So, Paul goes on in verse 13, “For this reason, you must take up God’s complete armour. Then, when wickedness grabs its moment, you’ll be able to withstand, to do what needs to be done, and still be on your feet when it’s over. So stand firm!” Now, what is the armour of God? Notice the echoes of Isaiah 11 here. “Put the belt of truth around your waist; put on justice as your breastplate; for shoes on your feet, ready for battle, take the good news of peace. With it all, take the shield of faith; if you’ve got that you’ll be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.”

Notice that everything about this picture is defensive except the sword. Again, the Messiah has already won the decisive victory. He’s won the ground. Creation once again belongs to him. Our job is to hold it against the enemy. And, notice, as Paul has said before and as he says here in verse 10: We stand in God’s power and might, not in our own. We know what this power can do, because it’s the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and now, as Paul has said over and over, we are “in the risen Messiah” and that makes us strong in the strength of his might. There’s an interesting parallel to this in Romans 4. There Paul writes that Abraham was “strong in faith”, believing God’s promise even though everything around him said not to trust this strange God. He was strong because he trusted the God who had the power to accomplish what he had promised.

¹ *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, ed. F.G. Martinez and E.J.C Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 109.

Brothers and Sisters, we stand in that same faith, but unlike Abraham we have every reason to believe. No one knew this God in Abraham's day. You and I live with the witness of all the generations who have known and experienced this God ever since. You and I live with the witness of the resurrection of Jesus, the greatest show of God's might in history and the event by which he has inaugurated his new creation. If Abraham had reason to be strong in faith, we have reason to be even stronger. So stand firm in the Messiah's battle and put on his armour to guard against the enemy who wants nothing more than to take back the ground he's lost to Jesus.

As the Messiah puts on his armour for the battle in Isaiah, so should we. It shouldn't be surprising that the first thing Paul says to put on is the truth. All along he's been warning us not to believe the lies that have brought sin and death to the world. All along he's warned us to be committed to the truth and not to be deceived by the lies around us. In Isaiah 11:5 the Messiah puts on the belt of justice and faithfulness. In the Greek "faithfulness" is translated as "truth".

The truth of God's creation and his new creation are the foundation of the gospel. Isaiah saw the Messiah setting creation to rights, and to do that demands the truth to put an end to the lies. The gospel proclaims Jesus' victory and the new creation that has come with him out of the tomb, the truth of the goodness of God's original creation and the truth of the goodness that he's now restoring it to. Our calling now is to stand firm on that foundation and to wrap that truth around us like a belt. The gospel is not about our feelings or our imaginations or what we think people will like or not like. The gospel is about truth: God's good creation and Jesus' setting it to rights.

But our main piece of defensive equipment is the breastplate—the

breastplate of justice—or righteousness in some translations. The Greek word means both. Paul takes this image from Isaiah 59:17. It's not just righteousness as we often think of it as moral goodness. It's truly *justice*. It's God's desire to see this broken world full of pain and tears truly set to rights. In Isaiah 59 it's the divine warrior who goes out to bring God's justice to the world, but Paul understood that the divine warrior is Jesus the Messiah. And he didn't go out to bash heads in order to bring justice. He went in humility to the cross. He gave his life to free us from sin and to wash away the stain of death, so that he could fill us with his Spirit and make us his temple. And, in that, Paul's saying we're now called to follow in Jesus' steps to bring God's justice, his righteousness to the world as we live out Jesus' new—renewed—way of being human. This is why Jesus talked in the Sermon on the Mount, about his people hungering and thirsting for justice. It's our breastplate. It's the thing staves off our own temptations to idolatry and greed that would otherwise cause us to bring more pain and tears into the world.

And then the shoes of peace. Another echo of Isaiah that Paul and the Jews knew so well: "How beautiful are the feet of the messenger who announces peace...who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Except whereas for people like the old Paul, this had become a hope of violent military victory over the pagans, in Jesus peace has come through his resurrection. The enemy did his violent worst, and Jesus has trounced him with life. And now he commissions us to be his ambassadors, running to the world to announce that in the risen Messiah, the king has returned to establish the peace that Israel had so long hoped for and the peace that even us gentiles hope for, knowing that the world is not as it should be. Put on your gospel shoes!

And then the shield of faith. Paul seems to have come up with this all on

his own. He pictured flaming arrows that would set an ordinary shield on fire, but there were things you could do to prevent that—like stretching water-soaked leather over your shield. Faith is like that, says Paul. The Messiah's faith and then our faith that answers in return. Faith will protect you from the enemy. Don't let go of it.

And then, back to Isaiah 59:17, the helmet of salvation—the helmet of "rescue". The divine warrior has won the battle and rescued the captives. Brothers and Sisters, we've been rescued by Jesus, put that helmet on not only to stand your ground, but as with all these things, when we take up the Messiah's armour, we take up the Messiah's task. He's rescued creation from the devil and now we're part of the battalion called to keep the devil from taking creation back. That helmet of salvation reminds us—maybe that's why Paul puts it on our heads—that the Messianic mission is ultimately a rescue mission—to rescue creation and to rescue humanity from the enemy's lies.

And then there's the one defensive bit of God's armour: the sword of the Spirit, which Paul says is God's word. The word is the gospel, the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen. The word that fulfils Isaiah 11:4 where the Messiah smites the earth with the rod of his mouth and slays the wicked with the breath of his lips. His breath. In both Hebrew and Greek the word for breath is also the word for spirit. Brothers and Sisters, Paul knew that when he proclaimed the gospel, God's Spirit went to work: confronting idolatry with the true and living God and sinners with a message of hope. The battle isn't won with violence. It's won with the good news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But Paul knew, too, that if we're going to stand firm in the Messiah, and if we're going to put on his armour, we'd better be praying, too. He continues at verse 18:

“Pray on every occasion in the Spirit, with every type of prayer and intercession. You’ll need to keep awake and alert for this, with all perseverance and intercession for all God’s holy ones—and also for me. Please pray that God will give me his words to speak when I open my mouth, so that I can make known, loud and clear, the mystery of the gospel. That, after all, is why I’m a chained-up ambassador. Pray that I may announce it boldly; that’s what I’m duty-bound to do.”

The military imagery is still here. Like a sentry on guard: stay awake and alert. Pray and persevere. Don’t give up. The lies will swirl around you like a hurricane, but stand firmly in the truth of God’s new creation and *pray*. Connect with him in that mysterious and inexplicable gift he’s given us to speak with and to be in communion with him. It’s one of the main reasons he’s given us his own Spirit. And here, I think Paul is again thinking of Isaiah 59 and the divine warrior, driven by the Spirit. “As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my Spirit that is upon you and my words that I have put in your mouth shall not depart out of your mouth...from now on and forever” (Isaiah 59:21). So pray. Pray, pray, pray and pray that the Spirit will give you—will give us all—the boldness to speak God’s word: his truth, his wisdom, his gospel into a world so desperately in need of them. It doesn’t matter if you’re chained up for the gospel like Paul. That’s the gospel paradox. God reveals his strength when we are at our weakest—just as he did at the cross.

And then the last few verses of the letter. Paul wraps things up saying, “It’s important that you should know how things are with me, and what I’m up to; so our dear brother Tychicus will tell you about it. He is a loyal servant in the Lord. I’ve sent him to you with this in mind, so that you may know how things are with us, and so that he may encourage your hearts.

Peace be to the whole family, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah. Grace be with all who love our Lord, Messiah Jesus, with a love that never dies.”

Tychicus is making the rounds to let them know what’s up with Paul. Again, Paul’s said it several times: he’s in prison. We don’t know what else beyond that Tychicus would have told them about Paul, but it’s telling that whatever the news is, Paul expects them to be encouraged. And it doesn’t seem that it’s news of a soon release. I expect Paul would have mentioned something like that. Instead, Paul seems to expect them to be encouraged by his chains. Again, the opposition he’s facing is a sign that the gospel and the Spirit are doing what they’re supposed to do, that the gospel is marching on, that (so to speak) Aslan is on the move, and the principalities and powers feel threatened. And that’s good news. So, knowing his brothers and sisters are standing firm and fighting the gospel fight, he wishes them peace and love with faith and grace—the heart of the gospel, the foundations on which God’s new creation is being built.

And then that last word. I’ll close with that. To everyone who loves the Messiah: grace. Grace with a love that *never dies*. The Greek word literally means “immortality”. Brothers and Sisters, this gracious love will never pass away. When the battle is finally over, when we have fought the good fight, when we have stood firm and kept the faith, when the church has finally done what she was created to do and expanded God’s temple until his presence, his wisdom, his glory have filled the whole earth and Jesus has made a final end of death itself, when we have done what our Lord has called us to do and find—maybe to our own surprise—that we’re still standing on our own feet in those shoes of peace, when there are no more lies and Jesus is Lord, then our love for him—which may feel so

imperfect and inadequate today—but our love for him that kept us strong through the storm and the battle, will turn out to have been only the beginning of the great gift of love that we will enjoy for ever in God’s presence and in his creation set to rights, in that new heaven and earth in which there are no more pain or sorrows or tears or death, only grace and love.

Paul began his letter by directing our gaze back before the foundation of the world and now he points forward to day when not only are all God’s promises fulfilled, but when he himself sums up all things in heaven and earth himself, the fullness of all in all. And here in the in-between, in the middle of the story we stand: rescued by love, given a new gospel life in love, equipped with God’s word and God’s Spirit in love, and filled with God’s wisdom that, following Jesus, we will be the new humanity—the firstfruits of his new creation. Not only for our sake, but for the sake of the whole world over which Jesus the Messiah is already ruling as Lord.

Let’s pray: O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen*.