**Stand Firm Together**

Ephesians 6:10-18

***The small group of Union soldiers*** was stretched out across a hill, waiting for the next Confederate attack. The only ammunition they had was what they were able to scavenge from fallen Confederate soldiers down the slope in front of them. That was dangerous business as the next assault, complete with the terrifying rebel yell, could come at any moment. Knowing his men were down to only a couple of musket balls each Colonel Joshua Chamberlain ***ordered his men to fix bayonets*** and to be prepared to charge down the hill after firing one volley.

Chamberlain knew the importance of his regiment’s assignment there at the far end of Little Round Top at Gettysburg. He knew that his 100 men represented that last flank of the entire Union Army - so if they collapsed and fled, the whole Army was exposed and could be destroyed. And everyone in the north knew that support for the war effort was waning in the north. Robert E. Lee knew this better than anyone, which is why he had led his army up into Pennsylvania.

So Chamberlain knew that **retreat was not an option**. He and his men had to stand firm. They had to fight literally to the very last bullet and the very last man. Throughout the afternoon of that second day of fighting at Gettysburg Chamberlain and his men had done just that. They stood firm through one assault after another, enduring the rebel yell and firing down that hill into mass after mass of charging Confederate soldiers.

Finally, as the sun was setting and they knew the last attack was coming, Chamberlain went down the line, making sure everyone knew the plan. One shot, then charge in a wheeling motion like a hinge to sweep the rebels off the hill once and for all.

Sure enough, the Confederates broke through the trees as before, shrieking that bone-chilling cry and thundering up the hill. Chamberlain’s men knew not to fire right away but to wait until the enemy was close enough that you couldn’t miss. He held them steady, forcing them to wait. Then shouted “Open fire!” ***The 20th Maine listened to their commanding officer, stood firm*** until they heard that order - fired their last bullets and then, as one, stood up and shouted their own cry of defiance, pouring from their fortified positions down the hill at the shocked Confederates in front of them.

One after another, and in groups and batches, the Confederates threw up their hands in surrender, and the battle was over. ***Arguably in that moment the outcome of the Civil War was determined.*** Lee knew how very close he had come to breaking the back of the Union army and the will of the north to keep fighting.

We know the name Joshua Chamberlain and the location called Little Round Top because that small group of men from Maine STOOD FIRM. And they stood firm together. In the end, a universal fact of war as attested from ancient times to the present is that what enables a man to stand firm in the face of abject terror is one thing: **the man beside him**. In that moment it isn’t about the cause or the mission - all of life boils down to one reality: this man to my right and this man to my left are counting on me. If I cower in fear; if I turn and run, I am letting them down - those two men. Why do soldiers stand firm in the face of repeated assaults and almost certain death? ***They stand firm only because they stand together.***

This is Paul’s clear and overt exhortation in Ephesians 6:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil… and having done all, to stand firm.” Ephesians 6:10-11,13

This is our exhortation today as we wrap up this short series on connecting - in order to stand firm, **we must stand firm TOGETHER**. All of these verbs are plural - so to translate into good southern English we could say:

“Finally, y’all be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Y’all put on the whole armor of God, that you may all be able to stand against the schemes of the devil… and having done everything, y’all stand firm.” Ephesians 6:10-11,13

We’ll see three reasons to stand firm together and then seven ways to stand firm, following the armor of God. So let’s dive in. Why must we stand firm together?

**Why Stand Firm Together:**

* Because the devil is **Crafty**

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.” Ephesians 6:11

When we first meet the devil in Genesis 3, we are told that ***the serpent was crafty*** - the slipperiest, sneakiest of all the creatures on earth. We know from the New Testament that the devil is a liar and the father of lies. ***His main playbook is deception*** - so is it any wonder that our first piece of armor is TRUTH?

The devil is compared to a roaring lion, prowling around looking for someone to devour - crouching in the shadows waiting for some unwary traveler to wander by unprotected.

Now, if you knew **a hungry lion** was literally around the next corner what would you do?

* First, you’d probably go another way, right? Let’s avoid that corner. Sure.
* But if you couldn’t avoid that path and you had to walk by the lion, what would you do? How would you prepare?
* Maybe you would practice with your bull whip and try to intimidate the lion with your Indiana Jones skills.
* I’d have a big juicy steak ready to drop on the ground and run.

What prompts the Apostle Paul to write this whole section is to ***prepare a young church to face what was coming for them***. He was like Colonel Chamberlain preparing his soldiers - attacks are coming. Brace yourselves. Prepare your weaponry. Stay low behind your defenses.

Brothers and sisters, we have an enemy called Satan - the devil - the dragon in Revelation. His mission is to steal and kill and destroy. His main strategy is to lie and manipulate and deceive and distract us. But we are not unaware of his existence or his playbook - so let’s stay on guard together!

* Because **Spiritual Warfare** is real

“For we do not wrestle with 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.” Ephesians 6:12

We not only contend with one fallen angel called the devil, but we also do battle with all of his demonic minions who joined in his rebellion. We don’t know much about angels and demons but because of passages like this one we know that they are well organized and have a clearly delineated hierarchy. That means there are high level demons and low level demons. And they confer with each other.

**Two mistakes** people make with spiritual warfare: one is to ignore it altogether; the other is to get obsessed with it all the time. Two principles to keep in mind:

* **Compared to you and me**, the lowest level intern demon is massively terrifying and far beyond our ability to handle. Only a fool goes up against an enemy you don’t know and can’t see. Spiritual warfare is no joke.
* But compared to Jesus, the highest demons and the devil himself are nothing and less than nothing. It’s what Loki said to Iron Man, ***“What quarrel does an ant have with a boot?”*** The devil is the ant. Jesus is the boot. That’s actually biblical language - Loki is referencing Scripture there, just blasphemously applying it to himself. All enemies of God are a footstool for Jesus’ feet. “The God of peace will soon crush Satan, underneath your feet!”

The devil is real, and he is crafty. Spiritual warfare is real, **so prayer matters** in Jesus’ name. Do you remember the book series ***This Present Darkness***? I vividly remember how the angels would wait for the believers to pray - the prayers of the saints powered up the angels for their warfare. We can’t be sure that’s how it actually works, but to me it’s a helpful and inspiring way to think about the connection between our prayers and the spiritual realm. One more reason to stand firm together.

**Why Stand Firm Together:**

* Because **Tribulation** is coming

“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day.” Ephesians 6:13

***What is the “evil day?”*** I believe it’s a double meaning - referring in general to your personal day of testing, whatever that may be; and also referring to THE “big T” tribulation and the unveiling of the Antichrist.

You might be in the midst of your “evil day” right now. If you aren’t guess what, it’s coming. Jesus told us, “In this world you will have all sunshine and roses…” Oh no - ***“In this world you will have TROUBLE… tribulation***… but take heart, I have overcome the world.” Jesus did not promise his followers the avoidance of persecution and opposition, he promised the opposite - “If they persecuted me they will come after you as well.”

So ***we need to be training NOW for the testing that is coming SOON.*** Put it in athletic terms: what would you think of Nikita Kucherov if he stopped skating and working out and just sat on the couch all day eating pizza and chips? Kuch is having the season of his life because he is working harder than anyone. He is training every day - pushing his body to the limits of what is humanly possible so that when the puck is there he can get to it faster than anyone else. He is preparing for the big day.

And you better believe he is training with Stamkos and Hedman and Point and the other guys - because every athlete knows ***you need your teammates*** to encourage and push you in order to keep improving and be at your best.

***So how prepared are you for your upcoming test?*** Have you been training in prayer and Bible memory? Have you built up the muscles of your faith, so you are deeply confident in the goodness of God? The rest of this message will help us with that training so let’s pivot from ***the WHY to the HOW*** to stand firm. Paul shows us the key in verse 10:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” Ephesians 6:10

It’s not “believe in yourself” or build up your self-confidence or stockpile tons of survival supplies - it’s **be strong IN THE LORD**. It’s all about JESUS. All of the armor is about Jesus and drawing close to Him.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Tighten your **Commitment** to Jesus,
	* He is the **Truth**

“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth.” Ephesians 6:14

The pieces of armor ***begin with truth and end with Scripture*** - so really the whole section is framed by this idea of standing firm in the truth as revealed in God’s Word. And God’s ultimate revelation is in Jesus Himself, who IS the truth.

Remember, ***the devil’s main strategy is DECEPTION***, so our best defense against those attacks is to deeply and thoroughly know the truth. And the main truth to know is the truth found in Jesus - that He is the Son of God, the Savior, the Lord, the image of the invisible God, the exact representation of His being. He is the way, the truth and the life - if we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father.

So, our first application of how to stand firm is to tighten up your commitment to Jesus Christ the Lord. Cinch up that belt and **lock in your allegiance**. This is what holds everything else together - a clear and decisive covenant bond with Jesus as YOUR LORD because He is THE LORD.

***Odysseus was a fool*** to listen to the song of the sirens, knowing that all who hear that song are drawn to it and will dash themselves to pieces on the rocks around them. But his curiosity got the better of him and he wanted to hear that song, so he had his men stop their own ears with wax and bind him to the mast of the ship with a promise to not let him go no matter what he shouted at them. Again, a much better plan would have been to sail around that whole area or to all have wax in their ears. But being “tied to the mast” is a common picture these days of locking in a secure, unshakable decision.

***Have you tied yourself to the mast of JESUS?*** Is He your firm foundation and the anchor of your soul? Are you committed to Him no matter what? That is the belt that holds the rest of your armor in place. If you are wishy washy on that dedication your spiritual pants could fall down at the most inopportune time.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Entrust yourself **Fully** to Jesus
	* He is your **Righteousness**

“Having put on the breastplate of righteousness.” Ephesians 6:14

Of all the pieces of armor, this one is the most obviously **ARMOR**. If you were doing battle in the days of arrows and swords, you would be very glad to be wearing a solid metal breastplate that covered all of your vital organs, front and back. We know from verse 16 that flaming arrows are coming our way, so we have a shield for that but also a breastplate called RIGHTEOUSNESS.

This breastplate represents your ***JUSTIFICATION*** - being declared righteous in Christ - and so it goes right along with the helmet of salvation.

Think about ***how the devil might attack you in this area*** - whispering or shouting at you that you’re a sinner, that you’re not worthy, that you’re a fraud and a fake; that if people knew the real you they would kick you out of church and expose you for your selfishness and sin. The name satan means accuser.

And the trouble with accusations like this is that **they are mostly true**. We are all sinners. We are not worthy. We don’t deserve God’s acceptance or love. We don’t want everyone around us to know everything we think and feel and do. It’s like Thor said when all the other avengers tried to lift his hammer and couldn’t - “It’s simple,” he said, “You’re all not worthy.”

How does the devil come after you? We are probably evenly divided between those who feel terribly unworthy and those who feel really pretty righteous. For each of us it’s a question of whether our default sin is selfishness or pride. If our enemy can keep us focused on either side he has won - if he can convince you that you’re worthless and terrible, he has won. Or if he can convince you that you’re amazing and wonderful and righteous, he has also won. The first one is a prodigal, the second is a pharisee. Both are lost.

The cure to both selfishness and pride is the gospel - taking refuge in the righteousness of Jesus alone. Entrust yourself fully to Him - resting in His finished work and rejoicing in all He has done for you. ***Fix your confidence in Him***; make your boast in Christ the conquering Warrior, not in yourself.

We wear the belt of truth and the breastplate of Jesus’ righteousness. Third:

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Clarify your understanding of the **Work** of Jesus
	* He is your **Peace**

“As shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” Ephesians 6:15

Ok, show of hands - how many of you actually tie your shoes every day and how many just ***slip on your shoes***? It’s Florida so most of us are slip on people, right? I certainly am. I leave my Sambas nice and loose so I can just step into them every morning.

BUT - if I’m going to play some actual soccer or basketball or volleyball, I lace those shoes up tight. It’s one thing to walk around casually and sip coffee at Panera, it’s another thing to play ball against these growing teenagers who are getting bigger and faster every day. I need every advantage I can get - so they might play in Crocs but I am not going to!

***How are your GOSPEL LACES?*** Are you ready to run forward with the good news of Jesus? Or are you just out for a casual stroll? Do you still have your house slippers on when it comes to your ability to articulate the good news of the saving work of Jesus?

Have you written out and practiced your **30 second testimony**? Do you have a clear and simple way to share the plan of salvation with someone who expresses interest? Do you have some spiritual questions ready for your friends and neighbors - little prompts to keep the conversation going about Jesus and spiritual things?

Notice that Paul calls it here ***“the gospel of peace.”*** So when we think about evangelism it should not stir up in us a bunch of stress and dread. It’s not the gospel of “anxiety,” it’s the gospel of peace. So when you share this message of good news it should be calm, natural and stress-free. But that comes from practice and training. You have to lace up your gospel shoes.

And above all, you have to really ***know Jesus as your peace***. When you have experienced the life-changing grace of Jesus and found peace with God through Him, it becomes much easier to talk about Him. Remember the series we did back in December about God’s plan to restore ***SHALOM in Christ***. Jesus is not just our peace in the sense of ending our conflict with God because of our sin. Jesus is our peace in the broadest sense of bringing wholeness and restoration to every part of our lives and through us to this hurting and broken world.

So, lace up your gospel shoes. Fourth.

1. Hold fast to Jesus in **Faith**
	* He is your **Protection**

“In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.” Ephesians 6:16

The shield of faith is not about you mustering up enough emotion so you “believe enough.” The shield of faith is about knowing that Jesus is your protection. He is your security. To be with Jesus is to be safe. Just hold on to Him and that makes all the difference.

When the attacks come, you aren’t holding up your own efforts or worthiness or flexing your own impressive ability to believe. You are simply ***holding up the name of Jesus***, with the certainty that He will protect you - even if you die.

* **Paul** held up the shield of faith when he was chained to a Roman guard and said, “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”
* **Peter** held up the shield of faith when he and John stood before the Sanhedrin and said, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s eyes to obey you rather than God.” So, they kept preaching Jesus and the resurrection even when the Jewish supreme court ordered them not to.
* **Stephen** held up the shield of faith when he was about to be stoned to death by Saul the Pharisee, as that noble deacon recited the history of Israel and saw Jesus Himself at the right hand of the Father in heaven.
* **John** held up the shield of faith as he wrote his letters to the early church, urging them to love one another and hold fast to the Lord Jesus.
* **David** held up the shield of faith when he heard Goliath the philistine taunting the armies of Israel. David was not confident in his own abilities but in the power of the God of Israel, whom Goliath had defied.
* **Elijah** held up the shield of faith when he stood on Mount Carmel and mocked the prophets of Baal.
* **Moses** held up the shield of faith when he commanded Pharaoh to “let my people go.”
* And **Abraham** held up the shield of faith when he placed Isaac on the altar and surrendered even the child of the promise to the safe-keeping of the God who enabled that boy to be conceived.

Read Hebrews 11 for a longer list of the heroes of the faith. The point is not the amount of their faith but ***the OBJECT of their faith - the Lord Jesus.***

**Read the Psalms** and hear their common refrain: “The LORD is my light and my salvation.” Psalm 27. “The Lord is the stronghold of my life, whom shall I fear?”

“Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Psalm 23.

Are you getting the feeling that all of these pieces of armor mean the same thing? That’s because they do. The armor is a package deal because it’s all a metaphor for JESUS.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Renew your **Mind** in Jesus
	* He is your **Salvation**

“And take the helmet of salvation.” Ephesians 6:17

The breastplate covers your chest and heart. The helmet covers your head. Jesus covers all of you. He is your salvation. So be strong in the Lord. ***Know Him as your rock and your fortress.*** Know Him as the stronghold of your life. Know Jesus as your good shepherd and your faithful, loving older brother.

Renew your mind in the person and work of Jesus. ***Fill your mind with the truth about Jesus*** and the Word of Jesus. Fill your mind every morning, every day - throughout the day. Carry scripture with you by memorizing verses and by literally carrying notecards with you. Place them around your house and in your car, on your desk at work. Carry verses in your pocket. Use your phone to remind you to read the Bible instead of to check social media.

Think of your daily time in the Word of God as the way you put on your helmet every day. Is your helmet like a little hairband? Or a flimsy old sweatband? Or is it a shiny bronze? Well polished because your Bible is well read? Two more.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Sharpen your knowledge of the **Word** of Jesus
	* He is your **Strength**

“And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Ephesians 6:17

It has often been pointed out that the Lord only gave us ***one offensive weapon***: the Sword. I would argue that our gospel shoes are also what enable us to move onto the offensive. But the point is good - we don’t have a battle axe or throwing stars or crossbow or anything. What we have is a sword.

And in ***Hebrews 4***, when the writer compares the Bible to a sword do you know what it is slicing through? Our own thoughts and intentions. It divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow. In other words, the Bible cuts through our BS. It slices out our pretensions and excuses. It cuts to the HEART.

And as we invite the Lord to **do surgery on US** with His Word we grow in the ability to use that sharp sword to help other people to grow.

The Bible is a dangerous weapon. It is very possible to use it as a club and beat people down with it instead of as a surgical tool to bring them healing and life. ***This is why all of these resources must be used TOGETHER.***

You can’t trust your own understanding and ideas all the time. We need each other to help test and approve what God’s will is. We need others to help stir us up to love and good deeds. On our own we will settle into whatever habits and patterns we find comfortable and preferable. You can’t see your own blind spots - that’s why they’re called blind spots.

Be strong **IN THE LORD**. If you start thinking the power and wisdom are YOURS - you will misuse the authority of God’s Word. But if you keep the focus on Jesus and His love and grace, you will become more and more skillful in the application of God’s Word to the deepest parts of peoples’ hearts and lives.

Jesus is our strength. He is our mighty warrior. Apart from Him we can do nothing. So we wield the sword of the Spirit in the power of the SPIRIT. And that leads to Paul’s final exhortation - to pray.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Draw close to Jesus in **Prayer**
	* He is your **Life**

“Praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.” Ephesians 6:18

Do you see how all of the armor is about Jesus? So is prayer another piece of armor and Paul just ran out of military analogies? Or should prayer be applied to all of the armor and every other part of life? That seems to be the right conclusion. Praying AT ALL TIMES.

**How to Stand Firm Together:**

1. Draw close to Jesus in **Prayer**
	* He is your **Life**

“To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.” Ephesians 6:18

Paul is clear we are to ***pray continually***. Our lives are to become lives of prayer. And that will be the result if we bind ourselves to Jesus, who is the truth. And if we entrust ourselves fully to Jesus, who is our righteousness. And if we clarify our understanding of the work of Jesus, our Peace. And if we hold fast to Jesus our shield and protector. And if we renew our minds with Jesus, who is our salvation. And if we sharpen our knowledge of the word of Jesus.

Then our every breath will be Jesus. Our every step will be with Jesus.

And as we pray for each other we will be reminded that we wear all of this armor and ***stand firm TOGETHER***. Because as we are bound to Jesus by faith He unites us with each other by faith. So if we stand firm at all we will stand firm together.

For those of us who have been to **Cuba**, this is what is most impressive about the Cuban pastors and leaders there. About half of the pastors and believers have left the island permanently in the last three years. So the ones who remain there have been forced to band together in faith and love.

They don’t judge the ones who have left - thankful for those who find safe passage to the U.S. or other places. They grieve the loss of relationship and have to make lots of adjustments with pastors relocating to cover churches that now have no pastor. They struggle with lack of food and supplies and basic necessities of life.

***But they have each other. And they have the Lord.*** So they suit up in the armor of God every day - being strong in the Lord TOGETHER. And when we go, we are locking arms with them, standing side by side with them to help them suit up in Christ and stand firm a little longer.

We can stand with these brothers and sisters even here from a distance as we pray for them and call on the Lord to empower and sustain them; knowing that they are also praying for us!

The battle is real. Our enemy is real and is coming for us. The evil day is coming. So let’s stand firm. And stand firm together.