

**Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.**

**(Ephesians 6:10)**

## Introduction

Perhaps you have been following the global news. If so, you are aware of the hurricanes pummeling the United States. A couple of weeks ago it was Harvey. As I write, it is Irma. Jose is following frighteningly close behind Irma.

Hurricane Harvey caused \$160 billion damage as it flooded Houston, Texas—the fourth largest city in the United States. There have been heroic stories in the midst of this tragedy, as neighbours have helped neighbours and many people, who live far away, have come to the aid of their fellow citizens.

But you may also be aware of what has become quite a scandal in Houston. Joel Osteen, along with his wife Victoria, pastor the mammoth Lakeland Church, located in Houston. Weekly attendance at this church is about 52,000 as they gather in five or six services in the 16,800-seat facility.

The church has been accused of being slow to respond to the need for shelter during the flood. Osteen has offered various explanations and, to be frank, he and the church may be getting an unfair rap. I don't know. What I do know is that the experience of Osteen, of his congregation, and of his fellow Houstonians has been a painful one. It is interesting that last week the church's attendance was not much more than 2,000. That is quite a drop from 52,000!

Joel Osteen is a prosperity preacher, who teaches that God wants his children to be prosperous, wealthy and healthy. He wrote a best-selling book titled *Every Day is a Friday*. But after these devastating floods, and after the devastating PR nightmare for the church, apparently every day is *not* a Friday! Another one of his best-selling books, *Your Best Life Now*, teaches that we can go from material blessing to material blessing, from physical blessing to physical blessing, and from relational blessing to relational blessing. I wonder, would the average Houstonian (including the thousands of Christians) who have lost almost everything they possessed, whose loved ones perished with the floods (and perhaps some of these are Christians), concur that this is their best life now? I seriously doubt it. And yet, as we will see, there is a very real sense that this could be so—not in the Osteen way, but rather, in a biblical way.

As we return to Ephesians 6:10, we do so with the intention of being encouraged that the struggles we face are struggles that we do not face *alone*. We do not face them *on* our own. The battles in which we find ourselves are battles we can face with confidence. After all, as this Scripture informs us, the battle is the Lord's.

As we saw previously, the Christian life involves a struggle—a struggle in which we have the responsibility to stand; to refuse to retreat from the Lord. Such a struggle can be an overwhelming thought and experience—until we realise that the battle is the Lord's. He provides what we need to fight the good fight of faith. We see this in the passage before us, the opening verse, where we are commanded to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.”

In this study, we will examine this commandment in order to help us to obey it. For if we do, we can be more than conquerors.

## Commanded to Believe

The first thing that Paul tells us is that we are commanded to *believe* that the battle is the Lord's. We need at least three fundamental convictions about this battle.

### Believe that There is a Battle

First, we must believe that there *is* a battle. In other words, the commandment reminds us that we are *at war*.

We need to understand that we live in a world where two kingdoms are in conflict. Ultimately, there are only two kingdoms—and they are not the ANC and DA, or the Republicans and the Democrats, or the Communists and the Capitalists, or the West and the East, or blacks and whites, or Orlando Pirates and Kaiser Chiefs, or Manchester United and Chelsea. The two kingdoms are God's kingdom (the kingdom of light) and Satan's kingdom (the kingdom of darkness).

The story of the Bible is the story of God's kingdom: God's people in God's place under God's rule. But this does not come about without a struggle, without a battle, without a conflict. God's kingdom advances in a sin-cursed world, where bad things happen to all kinds of people, including *God's* people.

Clearly, life is not a bed of roses for most people, and for the cross-carrying Christian, it seldom is. In fact, this is a major *modus operandi* of the devil and his devils.

What is the goal of the devil and his devils when we face struggles and circumstantial conflict? It is always, in one form or another, to get us to turn away from the cross of Christ, and this is coupled with his attempts to get us to stop taking up our cross. This is the ultimate temptation to retreat.

In Matthew 16, Jesus prophesied his impending death. Peter objected to the prophecy, and Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan!” (v. 23). Jesus considered the attempt to derail him from the cross to be a satanic attack. Moving away from the cross of Christ is always satanically motivated.

We who are soldiers in the Lord's army are in the midst of warfare. We are in Christian warfare with forces of evil who for millennia have opposed the hallowing of God's name, who have dogged the steps of the faithful as they have sought to see God's kingdom advance, and who constantly oppose the establishment of God's revealed will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, when God converts someone, he also enlists them to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

We might—in fact, we *must*—put it this way: The battle in which we find ourselves in this cosmic conflict is the Lord's. This is clearly a major idea behind this tenth verse. And the more we realise this, the more comfort, courage, and confidence we will derive from it.

We are in conflict. We are tempted to retreat and so we are cautioned not to. Where are these battles? In every sphere of life. With what/whom do we battle? With the world, the flesh and the god of this world. And “the utmost caution is necessary to prevent him from gaining an advantage,” says Calvin.

As we began to consider previously, it is vital for Christians, for the church, to grasp that we are at war. Only with such preparation will we be able to stand. There is a cosmic conspiracy that never takes a break. It began after creation and will continue until God throws the devil and his devils and all those loyal to the enemy into a pit, locks them in and throws away the key. But if we are unaware, we will be unprepared.

The devil is no laughing matter. I may have encountered two or three people in my ministry that were demon-possessed (or, more accurately, demonised). It was ugly, disconcerting, and disturbing. But those instances are probably few and far between. Yet I daily encounter a world where the evil one is at work. I need to be aware.

We need to grasp that there is one Lord over the world and yet he is opposed by one who is called the “the god of this age.” We need to understand both what this means, and what it does not mean

To which kingdom do you belong? To *whose* kingdom do you belong? Whose name are you exalting? Whose kingdom are you advancing? Whose will are you accomplishing?

The Bible clearly reveals both God's will (Ephesians 4:17-32) and Satan's will (Ephesians 5:1-6). We need to understand the aim of the Devil and his devils. They want the very opposite of what God wants. He desires to hinder, to divide and conquer the church.

We need to see our circumstances as extensions of this conflict. We face problems in the home, in the workplace, in the marketplace and in the church, but ultimately they are simply manifestations of the spiritual conflict. These circumstances are opportunities to stand rather than to retreat. They are opportunities to stand up and to take up our cross and to grow up in Christ as we look up to him.

When Jesus was crucified, Peter was three times confronted with his relationship with the Lord. Three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus. He failed miserably. But at Pentecost, given another opportunity, Peter (literally) stood for the Lord (Acts 2:14). "I will not back down," he seemed to say. "I will not deny my Lord again. I will not retreat. Been there. Done that. Got the heartache to prove it. Thankfully, I have learned to be weak enough to stand."

## Believe that the Battle is of/from the Lord

Second, we must believe that the battle is literally, *of* or *from*, the Lord.

God is the ultimate cause of the battle. This provides us with great hope. It was God who drew Satan's attention to his servant Job, and allowed Satan to attack Job (Job 1-2). The writer summarises that "the LORD" brought all the "evil" upon Job (42:11). When Satan wanted to sift Peter as wheat, he didn't just do it – he *asked* to do it (Luke 22:31-34). He asked because he needed the Lord's permission to do so. Paul recognised that his thorn in the flesh came from God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Jesus was delivered to be crucified "by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:22-23). The Lord summarised it well in Isaiah 45:7: "I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things."

A good illustration of this principle can be found by comparing two parallel accounts in Scripture. Second Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 both record David's numbering of the Israelite armed forces – an act that displayed his prideful arrogance in the strength of his army rather than the power of God. According to 2 Samuel 24:1, it was the Lord who, angry at David, incited him to number the army. According to 1 Chronicles 21, it was Satan who moved David to number the people. There is no contradiction. It was, indeed, the Lord who initiated the event, but he used Satan. As Luther famously said, the devil is, after all, God's devil.

A good and fair question when a natural disaster occurs is, who or what is behind this? I have already read one article addressing the question that inevitably arose surrounding the recent calamity in Houston. Where was God when the hurricane struck? He was where he has always been, and where he will always be – ruling the world he loves. Many suggest that the devil is behind terrible calamities. There may be some truth to that, but we must remember that God is always behind Satan!

## Believe that the Battle is for the Lord

Third, we must believe that the battle is *for* the Lord. God ordains the battles for his glory as he produces in it our good. Peter speaks about the fact that we "are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." He adds:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold

that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls.

(1 Peter 1:5-9)

Paul shared this conviction regarding spiritual warfare. He wrote to the Romans:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance....

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we are killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:18-25; 31-39)

Such a perspective empowers us and strengthens us to continue to stand even though marriage is disintegrating, children are breaking your heart, disease is destroying you or a loved one, hurricanes are wiping out your home, the economy is testing your faith, church members are rebelling, missions endeavours seem to be going nowhere, baptismal waters are not being stirred, or sin seems to be ravaging the church.

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## Commanded to Behave

Second, we are commanded to *behave* as if the battle is the Lord's. Paul does not exhort us to escape the conflict. Rather, he exhorts us to *engage* the conflict and, in some sense, to embrace the conflict, knowing that the battle is the Lord's.

In other words, we are commanded to battle—and we are to do so *with*—in union with—the Lord.

When David walked into battle against Goliath, this is the perspective he kept before him. Goliath mocked the puny, unarmed boy before him, and David replied, "The battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hands" (1 Samuel 17:47). When Jehoshaphat seemed powerless against the Ammonites and the Moabites, he prayed, "We have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chronicles 20:12). When the mighty forces of Sennacherib besieged Judah, Hezekiah encouraged his people, "Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyrian, nor before all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God, to help us and to fight our battles" (2 Chronicles 32:7-8). The angel of the Lord, through Zechariah, encouraged Zerubbabel, "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). When Israel stood in dread before the Red Sea, with the mighty Egyptian army closing in behind them, Moses said, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13-14). When Syria send forces to capture the prophet Elisha, and his servant cowered at the sight of the mighty army, Elisha encouraged him, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." The Lord opened the servants eyes to see the spiritual reality "and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:8-17).

We acknowledge that our challenges are different than those faced by the children of Israel in old covenant days. Noting that difference, Dale Ralph Davis observes, "The form of our fears is different; the adequacy of our God is the same." The apostle Paul would heartily agree.

Our hope of victory is rooted in faith. In the words of Bryan Chapell, "Faith that God has made us new, has made us his, and has made us able is essential before we will experience God's victory over compelling and compulsive sin."

There are some essentials required if we will behave so faithfully.

## We Are Weak

This commandment reminds us that we are *weak*. In the Greek, the command to “be strong” is a passive imperative. Without getting overly technical, this serves as a caution to know our weakness in the midst of the wiles of the devil and the world. The key to victory is to know that the battle is the Lord's and that it must be of the Lord. As we will soon see, this does not mean that we have nothing to do. But it does mean that, until we come to grips with our own insufficiency, we are not sufficient for the battle. Our awareness of our weakness is our greatest strength.

We can only do all things “through Christ who strengthens” us (Philippians 4:13). If he does not strengthen us, we are powerless. Peter believed that he was far stronger than he was. He granted that the other disciples might abandon Jesus at his betrayal, but never he! And yet he failed more spectacularly than any of the others. Israel fell at Ai because they thought that the battle was secured by their own military strength. Joshua sent spies to Ai, who returned with this report and counsel: “Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few” (Joshua 7:3). The three thousand that they sent were soundly defeated in battle. Samson trusted greatly in his own strength. After his hair was cut, he rose against the Philistines, thinking, “I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!” Sadly, “he did not know that the LORD had departed from him” (Judges 16:20). The Laodiceans boasted, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.” Jesus considered them to be “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” and warned, “I will vomit you are of my mouth” (Revelation 3:14–22).

Beware when all is well! Be on guard.

The command is clear: Be strengthened by the Lord. He is the source of our strength. We are not simply told to “be strong.” That is worldly, sentimental and ultimately useless counsel. In fact, that is our problem! We need the Lord's strength and that only comes to those who are on their knees.

Note that we are strengthened in “the power of his might” (“the vastness of his strength”). Not how powerful this “strength” is. It was powerful enough to raise Jesus from the dead. It is powerful enough to raise the spiritual dead to spiritual life. It is powerful enough to transfer souls from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son. It is powerful enough to change the devil's offspring into God's offspring. It is powerful enough to deliver sinners from his wrath. It is powerful enough to make one new man. It is powerful enough to turn idol worshippers into God worshippers. It is powerful enough to turn darkness to light. He is therefore powerful enough to strengthen you for any trial that you might face. He has undertaken to do so!

## We Must Work

Second, this commandment reminds us to work. Yes, you are saved by grace apart from works, but you are “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Ephesians 2:10) and must therefore “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

The command recognises the place of our will in this war. It helps us to remember that, though the battle is the Lord's, we must do something. In our temptation to retreat, we are commanded to stand. When Peter made his great confession that Jesus was the Christ (Matthew 16:13-20), Jesus pronounced a great blessing on him. Immediately after that, Jesus had to strongly rebuke Peter for objecting to the way of the cross (Matthew 16:21-23). He then spoke those famous words about the need of the believer to take up his cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24-27).

We are commanded to exercise our wills in the war, and this is to be motivated by what we know from God's Word about his power and character.

## We Must Look to God's Word

Third, this commandment points us to God's word. Psalm 119 is known as the greatest chapter in the Bible about God's Word. It is also a chapter that focuses heavily on affliction and struggle (vv. 25, 28, 50, 67, 81, 94, 109-112, etc.). The Word is the means by which the psalmist was strengthened for his struggle. The Word informs us of the battle and it transforms us for the battle and reforms us in the battle.

## We Must Wear

Fourth, this commandment reminds us what we must wear. To be passively strengthened by the Lord, we must actively put on the armour of the Lord. His strength is experienced in a suit.

The Christian is also especially clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As we saw previously, this armour represents God himself. The Christian puts off the old man and he puts on the new man. He does this by having a new mind. And this new mind reminds him that he is different. This is experienced as we believe God's Word.

Dale Ralph Davis writes, “Our most dreadful fears are subject to God's power.” And this power is found in his gospel.

Christian, we need to wear Christ—to be “robed” in him. Preach this gospel when you awake and then face the world properly clothed.

## We Can Win

Fifth, and finally, this commandment reminds us that we can win. The commandment, like all of God's commandments, is an inverted promise. It serves as a promise. Augustine famously said, "Lord, command what you will, and give what you command." The implied promise in the command to stand is that God will give us the power to stand.

In other words, Christian, you can stand. As Calvin wrote, "We must prepare our minds for the battle. A promise of victory is, indeed, involved in the exhortation *that you might be able.*" It is a comfort that, in our weakness, we can win. We can stand our ground.

Hurricane Harvey has left Houston. That city is beginning to dry out; it is beginning to recover. But what about the faith of believers who were affected by it? Will they continue to stand? If they had been living on a steady diet of *Every Day A Friday* and *Your Best Life Now*, they were not prepared for that painful Friday, and that even more painful Saturday and Sunday. But if they had heeded the words of the inspired apostle, then they would have been.

What about you? Christian, remember that the Bible teaches us that the battle is the Lord's. So be aware of it. And believe it. And behave like it. If you do, you will be blessed in it as you are built by it.

AMEN