

Be Strong in the Lord!

Did you hear the news about Hurricane Francine this last week? It hit the coast of Louisiana on Wednesday night with 100 mph winds. Uprooted trees blocked roads. Cars were flipped. Boats were crushed. Roofs were blown off. Half a million people were without electricity. It reminds me of the destruction we just sang about in Psalm 46. The power and punch of such a hurricane, though, is nothing compared to the devil and his followers who are constantly attacking us. Near the end of his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul encourages us to be strong in the Lord.

Know your enemy

Greatest struggle in life is spiritual

There are many things in life that we struggle with – job, school, cleaning, doctors appointments, shopping, meals, pain, loneliness, etc. The Apostle Paul reminds us that our greatest struggle in life is spiritual. Our eternal destiny is hanging in the balance – either an eternity of happiness in heaven, or never-ending excruciating pain in hell. Every sin steers you away from Jesus. Every sin is like crossing over the center line on a two-lane road. It's deadly dangerous. Every sin has the potential of pulling you away from Jesus and killing you eternally. The devil would like it very much if you thought to yourself, "My faith is so strong I don't need to be concerned about the devil." Then he would have you right where he wants you – trusting in yourself. If you are not aware of sin in your life and if you do not struggle against temptation (which can be very difficult to keep your mouth from saying something hurtful, or clicking on a website just to see what's there), or if you do not think much about your relationship with God, then you are in danger.

St. Paul said (:12), "**our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**" We are fighting against rulers and authorities in this world that oppose God and what he says in his Word – things like the teaching of evolution, or sexual immorality, or greed and selfishness. We are fighting against spiritual forces of evil. They do not have physical bodies so you can't stop them by building a wall around your house or church and hiding inside. We are fighting against forces which are in the

heavenly realms. They are stationed above the earth and can always see what we're doing.

Devil and demons are strong and relentless

The devil and his demons are strong and relentless. They are constantly using every opportunity they can to attack. It's not like in a football game where each play lasts for about 4 seconds and then the two teams have up to 40 seconds to rest before the next play. Our spiritual struggle is more like a wrestling match where the wrestler can not relax for one second or else his opponent can pin him to the mat and beat him. The devil and his demons are constantly stretching their gnarly claws to grab ahold of your soul and drag you into hell with them.

The devil and his evil forces look for you at your weakest moment and hit you hard in your weakest area. If you have a personality that is a little insecure, they will tempt you to doubt God's love. If you have more of a care-free personality – which is fine – they will tempt you not to care about your relationship with God. They will use a tragedy or a series of set-backs to tempt you to doubt if God really loves you. They will use the death of a loved one to tempt you to doubt if there is life after death.

The devil and his demons have thousands of years of experience in how to trip up and entrap humans. If the devil can not get you to indulge your sinful desire and give into a temptation, then he will tempt you to feel proud of yourself that you did not sin. If he can not get you to feel proud of yourself for being so pure and holy, he will tempt you to despair of God's goodness and think, "How could God forgive a miserable sinner like me?" If he can not get you to despair of God's goodness, he will tempt you to think, "Jesus forgives me so it doesn't matter if I sin," and then you weave across the center line again. And on and on.

Put on the full armor of God

God has given you the armor

By ourselves, we are no match against the forces of evil. The Lord knows that we are doomed without him and we need help. The Lord cares about us. He does not want us suffering forever. He wants us to be happy with him. And so the Lord swallowed hard and sent his one and only, beloved, perfect son on a mission to do what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus came to fight our spiritual war for us. The devil tried everything he could to trip up Jesus. He attacked him directly and intensely for forty straight days when Jesus was alone and at his weakest. He used the voices of own Jesus' disciples to lure him away from the

road to the cross to save us. Satan used earthly rulers to humiliate him, strip him of his clothes, spit on him and laugh at him, but Jesus endured it all without sinning. Jesus did everything we were supposed to do, living a perfect life in every way. Through faith, simple trust in the heart, Jesus transferred his perfect life to you. Now when God calls up your record, it says that you are holy, pure, clean, perfect, righteous. And as Jesus hung on the cross, God punished him for everyone one of our sins. You already suffered for your sins in the person of Jesus Christ. Your sins are paid for. You are forgiven. And when Jesus rose on Easter morning, he guaranteed you a physical life after death with him in heaven with a glorified body with no more aches or pains or problems. Alleluia! The Lord saved us. We want to stand firm in the Lord.

St. Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians when he was under house arrest in Rome. I imagine him staring at the Roman soldier standing at his door to make sure that he did not leave. I imagine him looking at the soldier's armor and thinking that just as the soldier's armor protected him in battle, God gives us spiritual armor to protect us in our spiritual battle with the devil. Let's take a quick look at this armor Paul describes for us.

When Satan suggests that sinning is fun and has no consequences or that we should not be so picky about the different teachings between our church and others, we have the (:14) "**belt of truth**" to keep us secure. God's Word reminds us that every sin is deadly serious and that false teachings are like poison to our soul.

When Satan accuses you of being a sinner who does not deserve forgiveness, you can rely on the (:14) "**breastplate of righteousness**." You have the righteousness, perfection, of Jesus that protects you from any accusation.

When the devil uses hardships to get you to wonder if God is punishing us for something we've done wrong, we run to Jesus with feet that are (:15) "**fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace**." God is not punishing us. We are at peace with him. You do not need to fear.

When Satan tries to get us to pat ourselves on the back because we're such good Lutherans who go to church, we have the (:16) "**shield of faith**" to ward off any such silly suggestions as we trust in God alone and not our own goodness.

When Satan tempts tries to plant the thought in our minds that there is no heaven waiting for us, we have the (:17), "**helmet of salvation**" to protect our minds from such a terrible thought.

If we need an answer for any spiritual situation, we do not have to take a guess at what is right or wrong because we have the (:17), "**sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God**" to direct and guide us.

God enables you to stand firm

Resisting Satan is going to be a constant struggle. Life as a Christian is not a smooth and easy ride. It is active duty in a combat zone. The devil and his evil forces are constantly trying to get you into their crosshairs. God promises, however, that he will help you in your struggle and enable you to stand firm. May I suggest that you take time each day to read a devotion and/or a section of Scripture, to keep yourself battle ready. And pray. Paul reminds us (:18), "**and pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests**." Paul is not thinking of prayers that you get a better job or that you get healthier and stronger, although such prayers are great. Here, Paul is thinking of spiritual matters. Pray that the Lord preserve you in the faith and give you strength to hang on to him no matter what, that you resist temptation. Also, honestly analyze yourself. You know yourselves better than I do. Where are you spiritually vulnerable? Do your friends lead you into sinful situations? Does Facebook or Instagram or Snap Chat or other social media steer you across the center line? What about alcohol or drugs? Too much television? Incessant worrying? Look into your heart. Notice where you are vulnerable and prepare yourself to take a stand on that issue. Resist every temptation.

I want you to go home today with the keen realization that you are constantly under attack by the devil. Standing firm in the Lord is going to be a spiritual struggle, but do not worry. Salvation depends on Jesus and he already did everything for you. Hang on to him. Remember how Paul began this section (:10), "**Be strong in the Lord and in his might power**." The Lord is stronger than a hurricane. He is stronger than the devil. He already saved you. He is preparing a place for you in heaven. Until that time and place, while the devil and his demons continue to attack you, stand firm in the Lord and be saved. Amen.