

## EPHESIANS 6:13

### STRENGTH FOR THE CONFLICT

“Take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.”<sup>1</sup>

**“I**f you don’t want trouble, don’t say anything, don’t do anything, don’t be anything.” This sage advice was offered by a man who frequently stood in the midst of battle. Preachers seek to cast the Christian Faith in the most positive light possible—no one wants to be thought negative; however, the Word of God is quite clear that you will have conflict *because* you are a Christian. Think of the times Jesus spoke of such conflict because of faith.

Jesus said, “I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” [MATTHEW 10:16], indicating the conditions those who follow Him can expect. The words that follow are especially stunning. The Master warned, “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour” [MATTHEW 10:17-19]. He did not say that men *might* deliver His people over to courts, but rather He said “they *will* deliver you over to courts.” He did not say “*If* they deliver you over,” but rather He said “*When* they deliver you over.” After cautioning that family members will be the adversary of the child of God, He warned, “You will be hated by all for My Name’s sake” [MATTHEW 10:22].

Shortly after this, Jesus warned those who wished to follow Him, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” [MATTHEW 10:34-39]. These words do not match the expectation of most professing Christians—they seek peace and prosperity, quietness and security, whereas the Master offers conflict and opposition.

Immediately before His exodus, the Master warned His disciples. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause’” [JOHN 15:18-25].

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The Lord warned those who would follow Him, “In the world you will have tribulation.” However, He followed that sobering warning with a word of richest encouragement for His people: “Take heart, I have overcome the world” [JOHN 16:33]. When engaged in conflict, struggling to maintain righteousness in the face of spiritual assault, where does one find strength? How can a mere mortal stand when receiving the attention of the enemy? The answer to these questions is found in turning to the Lord. Precisely what is entailed in turning to the Lord? These are the sort of questions we will explore today, God being our guide.

**GOD EQUIPS HIS PEOPLE FOR WAR** — In a future message I propose to explore more fully the armour God supplies His people. However, for the purpose of the message for this day, I am restricting my focus to the fact that God supplies all that is necessary to conduct spiritual warfare. Moreover, I want to stress the truth that each of God’s saints—each Christian—has the identical armour and armaments available. There are no super saints, neither are there any inferior saints. We each stand complete in the Son of God.

Among the people of God in this day is an alarming lethargy, a form of spiritual cowardice that seems to imagine that God does not want His people to experience any unpleasantness. However, one cannot read the Word of God without coming to the realisation that those who follow God are expected to fight, for He leads His people to war against the enemies of righteousness. To be certain, this is not a physical fight; it is, however, spiritual warfare that demands investment of life and strenuous exertion if we will honour the Master.

There are people who come to the Word convinced of the truth of that apocryphal verse, “God helps those who help themselves.” Apparently, that verse is written in the Book of Hesitations; however, such a verse does not exist in the Word of God. Never do you see the Lord urging His people to depend upon their own strength. We are taught to look to Him for all that we may require in the tasks He assigns.

Throughout the pages of the Old Covenant we see God’s promise to lead His people. For instance, as God prepared His people for the conquest of Canaan, He promised, “If you carefully obey [the] voice [of the Angel of the LORD] and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries” [EXODUS 23:22]. Obedience becomes the basis for God’s intervention to protect His people. Indeed, this promise fulfils the observation of the Moses that, “The Lord is a man of war” [EXODUS 15:3].

Later, as Joshua was set apart for service as the leader over the tribes of Israel, we read, “The LORD commissioned Joshua the son of Nun and said, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you’” [DEUTERONOMY 31:23]. This very promise is iterated in the opening words of the Book of Joshua. “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you” [JOSHUA 1:5].

An excellent example of God’s faithfulness is provided in an incident of the life of David. “When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to search for David. But David heard of it and went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines had come and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim. And David inquired of the LORD, ‘Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?’ And the LORD said to David, ‘Go up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand.’ And David came to Baal-perazim, and David defeated them there. And he said, ‘The LORD has burst through my enemies before me like a bursting flood.’ Therefore the name of that place is called Baal-perazim. And the Philistines left their idols there, and David and his men carried them away.

“And the Philistines came up yet again and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the LORD, he said, ‘You shall not go up; go around to their rear, and come against them opposite the balsam trees. And when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then rouse yourself, for then the LORD has gone out before you to strike down the army of the Philistines.’ And David did as the LORD commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba to Gezer” [2 SAMUEL 5:17-25].

David knew that he was facing a vicious foe, and so he turned to the LORD. God commanded him to attack, and when the attack succeeded, David’s response was, “The LORD has burst through my enemies before me like a bursting flood.” God fought for His servant because David obeyed Him. Again, the enemies of the LORD came against David, and David’s first act was to ask what the Lord’s will was. God commanded him to wait. The tactic differed, but the strategy was still to let the LORD precede him in battle. Indeed, because David sought the Lord’s will and because he did as the LORD commanded, we read that he was again successful. God expected obedience, and as result would ensure that David was not defeated by the enemy.

These battles were against mortal foes, to be certain; however, the principle is the same. David waited for the Living God to fight his battles, and God was faithful. In either instance, David was responsible to be obedient and God was responsible to fulfil His promise. The same principle holds in the realm of spiritual warfare—our responsibility as Christians is to be obedient to the Master; His responsibility is to fulfil His promise to enable us to fight.

Beyond these very specific promises mentioned earlier, in which the Lord pledged to fight for His people, are promises that pledge His presence and His comfort in times of trial. One of the rich promises of the Word is that which is found in the prophecy of Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you [ISAIAH 43:2].

Though these promises that are cited have been specifically given to Israel, it is evident that they present a truth concerning the Lord that can be taken as applicable to each believer in the Risen Son of God. Ultimately, we have the promise of the Living God, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son” [REVELATION 21:7]. God promises victory over evil if we are obedient and faithful. The obedience requires that we look to Him and the faithfulness requires us to avoid attempting to stand in our own strength.

Paul makes precise point in his letter to the Corinthian Christians when he writes: “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’  
‘O death, where is your victory?’  
O death, where is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-57].

God has promised His people victory—and the victory promised is in Christ the Lord. Standing in faith in Christ Jesus the Lord, the child of God is assured of victory over the world. This is the promise of God. “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” [1 JOHN 5:4]. All who have been born from above are servants of the Living God. Equipped by the Lord God with the armour and the armaments that He provides, we anticipate victory in every conflict. So long as we stand in Christ, obedient to His Word, we will be victorious.

Perhaps you recall the militaristic statements of Paul? “As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: ...with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” [2 CORINTHIANS 6:4a, 7b]. Later, in that same missive to Corinthian Christians, the Apostle wrote, “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:4, 5]. Undoubtedly, these statements are disturbing to the casual Christian. However, we must face the fact that God equips His people for spiritual warfare, and He expects that they will stand against the enemy. Frankly, if you are not fighting spiritual battles, you are neither honouring God nor fulfilling your calling.

Because I have stressed that God equips us for war, and in light of the well-publicized Muslim emphasis on war (jihad) against all who disagree with them, it must be stressed that our battles are restricted to the spiritual realm. The individual who is pugnacious, who is combative, who embraces hatred, knows nothing of the love of God. The Master instructs His people, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” [LUKE 6:27, 28]. This message of love for one’s enemies receives practical emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount, where the Master is recorded as saying, “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” [MATTHEW 5:39].

The message of gentleness and avoiding violence toward others is echoed in the Epistles. The Apostle Peter teaches those who are followers of the Risen Saviour, “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called” [1 PETER 3:9]. These instructions are but amplification of this singular thought that guides Christian conduct: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” [ROMANS 12:20, 21].

It is not merely an inconsequential aside to insist that we who follow the Master must seek peace with all men, though we must oppose evil. The Word of God is quite clear that the Child of God must “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building” [ROMANS 14:19]. This emphasis is expanded as necessary instruction delivered by the Apostle to the Gentiles near the end of his life when he instructed Timothy, “Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace”; and to ensure that no one would misunderstand his intent for all believers to accept this as their individual and collective responsibility, he concluded by pointing that such effort was to be exerted “along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” [2 TIMOTHY 2:22]. This admonition mirrors one of the closing injunctions found in his earlier letter to the young theologian. “As for you, O man of God, flee these things [pride, the desire for controversy, quarrelling, the pursuit of wealth—detailed in 1 TIMOTHY 6:3-10]. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” [1 TIMOTHY 6:11].

**GOD COMMANDS HIS PEOPLE TO RESIST** — “Take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.” You can tell a lot about a person by who her friends are; you can tell as much about a person by who her enemies are. Our enemies are not people we don’t like, but people who threaten our well-being or even our existence. Undoubtedly, the enemy of our soul threatens our well-being and even our existence. Of Satan’s masterpiece, the man of lawlessness, the Word of God says he “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship” [2 THESSALONIANS 2:4]. After all, Satan is “the slanderer,” for that is the meaning of his name, and he slanders the Master.

Those who oppose the Gospel of Christ position themselves in opposition to the work of God, and even in opposition to God Himself. We must not see such individuals as enemies, but we must recognise that their opposition is doomed to fail. Likewise, we must not imagine that we have the luxury of ignoring their opposition. Rather, we must push back against every effort to hinder the cause of Christ, advancing His work in every way possible.

Notice how the Apostle spoke of such individuals as he wrote one of his earliest letters that would be included in the canon of Scripture. He was writing the Christians in Thessalonica, who had suffered great opposition because of their faith. “You, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last” [1 THESSALONIANS 2:14-16]!

The Apostle sees God permitting human opposition to the expansion and the advance of the message of life because He permits sin to run its full course. The passage ultimately looks forward to a time during the Great Tribulation when Satan will have full rein, running unchecked throughout the world. However, the Apostle was specifically looking at some current event that would have been well known to his readers. It has been suggested, and it is quite likely, that he was referring to the expulsion of the Jewish people from Rome by the decree of Claudius. This would have taken place shortly before he wrote this letter. Paul understood that the opposition the young church faced was spiritual in nature and demonic in its origin; he also saw that preaching and teaching was resisting the work of the devil. In fulfilling the mandate to carry the Good News to all the world, Paul saw Christians as standing firm and resisting the work of the evil one. Focused on fulfilling God’s command, he committed judgement of those who opposed the advance of the Kingdom to God.

Others also opposed the Faith throughout the Apostle’s lifetime. In one passage of his final letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith” [2 TIMOTHY 3:1-8]. Understand that he is warning about individuals who present themselves as Christians—even Christian leaders, but their lives demonstrate that they are opposed to the Faith.

He also warned Timothy against a certain individual he identifies as Alexander the coppersmith. This individual in some way harmed Paul and thus merited this cautionary warning. We cannot be certain what this individual had done to merit such caution, but the Apostle does say that “he strongly opposed our message” [2 TIMOTHY 4:15].

Perhaps we can obtain further insight by referring to Paul’s earlier letter to Timothy, where as he began the missive he urged his erstwhile companion to “wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.” Then, he appended a note that by rejecting obedience and a consistent walk with the Master, “some have made shipwreck of their faith,” and he specifically noted that among such people was Alexander. Perhaps he had opposed Paul as God’s appointed emissary, as did Diotrophes who opposed John [3 JOHN 9], or perhaps he simply wanted the congregation to praise him. We cannot know precisely what Alexander did, but we are certain that by his action—whatever that action might have been—he threatened the work of God. Paul’s response was to hand this man over to Satan [1 TIMOTHY 1:18b, 19a].

Paul was focused on pleasing the Lord, and thus he saw opposition to the Gospel as opposition to Christ. Rather than physically or verbally attacking those who opposed his work, he released them into God’s hand. In the case of Alexander, he simply turned him over to Satan. Turning Alexander over to Satan is an example of the procedure advocated in 1 CORINTHIANS 5:3-5 for dealing with Christians who are recalcitrant to pleas to be righteous.

Paul saw such opposition to the Faith, not as individuals simply advancing their own interests or as individuals opposing the Apostle, but rather as the spiritual activity it really was. Such individuals were actually compromised—Satan had taken advantage of their lack of watchfulness and was even then exploiting these hapless individuals [see 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11]. The tragedy of such exploitation is that the entire church suffers to some degree when one member succumbs to the devil’s designs. For this reason, each Christian must resist the devil; and each member must encourage every other member to stand firm.

The term “withstand” (*anthistēmi*) carries the idea of resisting or opposing something or someone. In verse thirteen, when used in combination with “stand firm” (*stēnai*) and in a context of battle imagery, it seems to have the idea of being able to stand your ground.<sup>2</sup> So, the people of God are called to be aware of the reality of their spiritual enemy, to understand both the spiritual nature of the work to which they are called and the spiritual nature of the opposition they face, and to stand firm against all such opposition.

Let me be very practical at this point as I briefly discuss how we stand firm. We fulfil the apostolic mandate by knowing the will of God through reading the Word of God. This does not mean reading the occasional verse, but it means reading the Bible as it was meant to be read—consistently and consecutively—asking what the will of God is and applying it to our lives.

We will stand firm when we pray, specifically asking the Father to strengthen His servants and to equip us for duty. This is the reason the Apostle urges readers to be “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” This is not a request for those reading the letter to perfunctorily recite a prayer, but rather Paul is urging them to see that this is spiritual warfare [EPHESIANS 6:18b]. Specifically, Paul asks those first readers to be praying for Him “that words may be given [as he opened his mouth, so that he would speak] boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel” [EPHESIANS 6:18a, 19]. As you pray for those who labour to speak the Word of God through teaching and preaching, ask God to make them bold as they fulfil their appointments. Pray for all who share the Faith within your assembly to boldly witness to the grace of God, telling others of His power to save as they conduct their business each day.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s Note, **The NET Bible, First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

Again, we are standing firm when we obey the command of the Master, especially to tell others of His mercy and His grace. This is the command we received as the Master was leaving this earth and which we know as the Great Commission. Listen again to those familiar words. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” [MATTHEW 28:19, 20a]. If we are not evangelising, we are disobedient. If we are not making disciples, incorporating those whom God entrusts to our oversight, we are disobedient. It has been said that evangelicals are *doctrinal* exclusivists, but *functional* universalists. We say we believe in hell, but our failure to evangelise is just the sort of behaviour one would expect from those who believe that all will work out well for non-believers. Lacking a sense of urgency to witness, we show ourselves sceptical of the Judgment.

There is much more to standing one`s ground in spiritual combat—keeping oneself pure, avoiding sin, walking in the will of the Master—but all these aspects of standing firm will be addressed as we seek His will in the Word, pray for His power and strength and obey what He commands. There is one further point to be made in this message before we conclude, and that is that we will see evil days.

**GOD WARNS HIS PEOPLE OF EVIL DAYS** — “Take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day.” The Apostle is not writing of evil days that lie in some future period—the evil days he has in view are those in which we live. We become very comfortable in our present environs, but we need to keep a vital truth in view—this world is not our home: “Our citizenship is in heaven” [PHILIPPIANS 3:20]. So long as we are in the flesh, we will be compelled to struggle against evil and for righteousness.

Four times, the New Testament writers spoke of “the last days.” Think about when those days will be. In ACTS 2:16, 17, Peter was preaching following the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit. As he preached, he said, “This is what was uttered through the Prophet Joel:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.”

So, the descent of the Holy Spirit to empower that nascent church with power was fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Moreover, “the last days” appear to have begun at Pentecost.

Writing the young pastor of the Church at Ephesus, Paul warned that, “in the last days will come times of difficulty” [see 2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5]. As we saw earlier, these times are a vivid description of the days in which we now live. So, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that “the last days” began at Pentecost and continue to this present time. I suggest that “the last days” speak of the entire Age of Grace, or what eschatologists commonly refer to as the Church Age. This present age is “the last days” spoken of by the Apostles.

Likewise, Peter wrote of the conditions that would prevail during the last days when he warned, “scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation’” [2 PETER 3:3, 4]. In this modern scientific age, it has become de rigueur to ridicule the idea that God created all things.

Let me hasten to the final use of the phrase “the last days” by a biblical writer. James writes, “Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days” [JAMES 5:2, 3]. In this present age in which we live to accumulate wealth, it would be very easy indeed to conclude that James was writing of the day in which we now live. Even dedicated Christians unconsciously absorb the worldly idea that the accumulation of things destined for dust is the summum bonum of life.

The evil day in which we must stand is this day in which we now live. Frankly, the evil day could have referred to any period during this Church Age, for the evil one has attacked the ramparts of the castle of grace ever since Christ returned to Heaven, and his forces will continue to attack the people of God until the day that Christ removes His people from this earth. If you are a Christian, prepare for war. You are at war with the forces of hell, and you will be required to stay alert until the day Christ removes you from this life. You need not fear, for the Master has equipped you with all that is necessary to stand firm against the wicked one. With the armour of God, you may be assured that you will “be able to withstand in [this] evil day.” Without the armour of God, you will surely fall.

Are you a Christian? Have you donned the whole armour of God? Are you standing firm against the forces of evil? Are you encouraging your brothers and sisters to resist the evil one? We need to encourage one another, and strengthen one another as the people of God. Should it be that you have never placed your faith in the Son of God, know that you are an enemy of grace. Your great need is to be born from above and into the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ the Lord died because of your sin, and He was raised from the dead for your justification. Therefore, the Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord al all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For ‘everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13].

Our sincere prayer is that you will believe this message of grace, receiving Christ Jesus as Master over your life. Then, having received Him, we pray that you will stand firm in this grace. Christian, we pray that each one is standing firm, resisting the forces of evil and seeking the glory of the Master. Amen.