

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

August 26, 2018

## *“Stand”*

*Ephesians 6:10-20*

**Rachel C. Thompson**

**10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. **12** For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. **13** Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. **14** Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. **15** As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. **16** With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. **17** Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

**18** Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. **19** Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, **20** for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.



On my brother's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, my father gave him a sword. Not just any sword, mind you. Lord of the Rings fans will appreciate that my father got him a full-size replica of Andúril, the sword that was reformed from the shards of the blade Narsil, which was carried by Aragorn, heir of Isildur. I was jealous.

Fantasy novels have long been my genre of choice. Damsels in distress weren't really my thing. I was fascinated by knights and swords and dragons and armor ever since I was a small girl. I love the sweeping drama of the mystery and the magic and a cause worth fighting for. I was raised up in the faith by a church full of pacifists, they were Mennonites, but somehow imagery of battles and armor caught hold of my imagination.

I finally got the chance to take fencing lessons when I was in graduate school, and while I found that my hand eye coordination left something to be desired, I still took great joy in learning how to parry and lunge and fight with my foil. So, this passage from Ephesians about standing firm, ready to fight the devil, wearing the armor of God; this passage has been in my soul for most of my lifetime.

Spiritual warfare is not something we talk about very often here at Second, or really in most mainline churches. We don't talk about the devil very much. We don't even usually talk explicitly about forces of evil. So it's ok if, when you hear our passage talk about the cosmic powers and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, you feel a little bit uncomfortable. I'm with you. Language like that seems more appropriate in the context of a Lord of the Rings movie than in this sanctuary. It doesn't belong here in 2018 in Roanoke, Virginia. It belongs in some kind of fantastic world filled with magical jewelry, hooded wraiths, armies of ghosts and walking, talking trees.

It's helpful at first, before we let this passage throw us for a loop, to think about the context it's coming from. The book of Ephesians is one of those delightful little letters that scholars can't quite place. It's only 6 chapters long, and it is a lovely summary of the Apostle Paul's thoughts on how the Christian faith can and should impact every aspect of our lives. Because of what we know about historical events, and the vocabulary and style of the letter, most scholars agree that Ephesians is a somewhat generic letter. It's not addressing a very particular issue or struggle, but rather, it was meant to be read by churches throughout Asia Minor who might all be facing similar circumstances. The letter claims to be written by the Apostle Paul, but again, for similar reasons, many scholars suggest that it may not have been written by Paul himself but by one of his followers who, according to the custom of the time, attributed it to Paul instead (since it is basically a summary of one of Paul's main themes). For now, since whoever wrote it clearly intended it to be heard from the voice of Paul, we'll give them the benefit of the doubt.

And Paul is coming out of a worldview where the existence of things like demons and forces and evil powers was taken for granted. So of course, that's how he phrases it. He's using this martial imagery to respond to the kind of struggles that he assumes the people in his context are facing. There is certainly a larger conversation we could have today about the realities of the spiritual realm, but for now, let's just agree to consider that Paul is aware that there are things in



this world that are beyond our control- powers and forces that can't simply be managed with basic logic or money or sheer physical force. Our life in this world is complicated, and evil is real, regardless of the vocabulary we use to describe it. So as we approach this passage, our focus can be less about the particular kinds of things we are fighting or standing against, and more about when we fight, when we take a stand, how are we to do it?

As a millennial, I've been raised up in what feels like an age of activism. We have access to so much information, so you can be aware of injustices that are happening every day, across the globe. This is partly a gift, because that means we can love and serve and listen to our brothers and sisters all over the world, and our life of faith *is* enriched every time we're paying attention to a new or different voice. So it's a good thing.

And it's also exhausting, because our access to information almost requires from us an opinion or stance (the right stance) on every single local, national, or world event. So much about the social world that we live in right now is defined by the things you're willing to stand up for. We seek friends who agree with us, and then we spend our lives screaming into the echo chamber.

Don't get me wrong, because action is a necessary part of our call as Christians. God doesn't ask us to be polite, God asks us to do justice. And sometimes, that means people aren't going to like the things we stand for. There are going to be moments when following Jesus will require us to take risks, to stand firm on a tough issue, big or small, regardless of the consequences.

But so much of our current brand of activism is just words. It's about posturing, projecting a particular kind of image, making sure that my friends know that they can still call me friend because I, too, publicly exhibited the right amount of cynicism about *x*, *y*, or *z* event.

But it's not just the act of taking a stand that matters. It's *how* you stand that matters.

You may remember the story of Antoinette Tuff, a school clerk at an elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, who, five years ago, on what she thought would be just a regular day, was confronted face to face with a young man who walked into the school, intending to commit a shooting. There's a recording of her 911 call that catches pieces of her conversation with the young man, Michael Hill. You can hear how she helps him decide not to follow through on his intentions, but instead to lay down his weapon, turn himself in and seek help for his mental health. I'm sure that inside, her heart must have been moving a mile a minute turning from fear to anger to who knows what else. But in that moment, this is what she said to Michael Hill: "We're not going to hate you, baby. I just want you to know that I love you, though, okay? We all go through something in life." That is how you stand. She could have responded to this unspeakably horrific moment in any way, but she chose to respond with the gospel of peace.

There were 800 children in that school. And not a one was hurt.

Now the story doesn't always end that way. We know that all too well. And for most of us, we'll never faces circumstances this dramatic, stakes this high.



But stories like this one reveal to us the possibilities of what the world could look like if we chose to stand firm, dressed not with worldly power, not with anger, not with fear, but dressed in the armor of God.

Is there something in this world that for you is worth fighting for?

Excellent. Here is how you do it.

Truth. Wear truth. Let your words be honest; let each one point towards God. Share as much truth as is necessary and speak all of it with love.

Righteousness. Defend yourself with righteousness. Don't pick up gossip or manipulation or ugly words to protect yourself, let the righteousness of your life speak in your defense.

Do whatever you have to do to make peace your habit. Apologize regularly. Forgive lavishly. Offer welcome to those the world rejects.

And faith, your faith will protect you. Because while the world is falling apart and everyone you've trusted seems to fall away, it's the hope you have in things unseen that will combat the fear that seeks to consume you.

The only weapon you need is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, a word that is always patient and kind and just.

But don't expect to always feel like you are winning.

Paul sure wasn't.

This letter is not presented as the story of a victorious person; it's presented as the story of a person in chains, suffering in prison for the sake of the gospel.

And yet, Paul is not calling for faithful believers to come spring him out of jail. He's not asking for a violent uprising. He asks for prayer, so that he might have the courage to continue preaching the mystery of the gospel with boldness.

See, the mystery of the gospel turns things upside down. The very idea that God took on human flesh in Jesus, was murdered on a cross, buried, and then raised back to life in three days... that idea turns all of our expectations upside down. It means that death is not what we think it is. It means that suffering can be transformed into power. It means that when we take a stand, we fight differently than how the world expects because the Lord of hosts is on our side. And God is able to accomplish immeasurably more than anything we could ask or imagine or do on our own. So put on the whole armor of God, my friends, and stand. Stand firm. Amen.

