

September 2, 2018

*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*

From start to finish, Ephesians tells how God has redeemed the world. In chapter 1, right after greeting his readers, Paul launches into telling how the story of our salvation began before the dawn of time itself. Deep in the hidden counsels of God, even before he made the galaxies, he planned to rescue mankind from doom; he chose you and me in Christ even before he had fashioned Adam and Eve.

What God had designed then came true in what Paul in two places calls *the fulness of time*. The Lutheran scholar John Reumann, once surveyed that Greco-Roman moment when roads and searoads lay open for the Gospel. It was also a time of universal yearning for a truth that could explain both the universe and me – that could tell the purpose for all things and set forth how you and I should live each day. It was a global matrix that Reumann nicknamed “the cockpit of history.” To that time and place God sent his beloved Son on his mission. What did this Jesus accomplish that would move people everywhere, without fear of idolatry, to adore him and confess him as Christ the Lord? He won on the cross, writes Paul in Ephesians 1...

*...redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.*

Then he who hung so bloody became King of Kings and Lord of lords, for God..

*...raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...*

But how shall the Mystery of the Ages, God’s plan for rescuing and uniting all humanity, become known? Through the Church. And so, after Christ ascends into glory God begins sending his Spirit to, as Paul says, have us *sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, sealed for the day of redemption*. Whenever God brings a sinner to faith, he wraps and covers that man or woman in the forgiving grace of his Son, and then places on him or her his own seal, in order to declare: “This one belongs to me for eternal salvation, and I will keep him safe.”

And we who are called also belong to each other; this is why Ephesians speaks much to congregational life. Every Baptism into Christ Jesus is Baptism into his Body the Church. God adopts us by grace into his family. Your human birth may have been as your parents’ only child,

but everyone reborn into Christ automatically gets siblings.

Next: How shall God's children live? In discussing what it means to *walk in a manner worthy of the calling* in Christ, to behave as *light in the Lord*, or *children of light*; Paul sees us, so to speak, living simultaneously on two planes. On one level you and I cherish our fellowship in the Spirit, especially when we gather to worship God in the communion of Christ. Of course, even as members of his body we are still sinful people. Therefore, we must strive to *maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. What does it tell us about churches that the Apostle must write to a Christian congregation and remind them:

*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

But when we do this, what a beautiful thing church fellowship is! As King David once sang of God's holy priesthood:

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*

*It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!*

*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!*

*For there THE LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

Ephesians gives a wonderful prescription for how we can do our part as God seeks to fulfil in us Psalm 133.

Nevertheless, we live not only on what plane of Christian fellowship but also on that of the human race in general – we are “in the world.” In it we may be workers whose bosses can be unreasonable, or else we're the employers who must cope with dishonest and lazy employees. We may find ourselves citizens under a regime whose leaders seem to have lost all sense of morality, and/or a clear understanding of justice. In our various social positions and relations, we may or may not be blessed by two parties who both fear the Lord. Some have spouses who enjoy the unity of faith; for others it is a blessing for which they can only pray. Living holy lives in the mundane orders of authority can mean rejoicing at the goodness that the light of Christ can bring – but it

can also mean bearing all things patiently for the sake of him who bore all things for us.

Which brings us, now that this sermon is more than half over, to today's final reading from this glorious epistle. As Saint Augustine writes in the *City of God*, Rome never ruled in any place where the boots of its legions did not march, and often those boots trampled on roads and human necks alike. Notice what a detailed description of a Roman soldier Paul, a former Pharisee of Tarsus, is able to provide!

But the truly marvelous thing is how he takes the military equipment that so many hated to see entering their province, and uses it as blessed metaphor:

- ▶ Standard issue belt that you tighten round your waist for the fight = God's truth.
- ▶ Protective breastplate = God's righteousness in Christ.
- ▶ Military sandals = eagerness to run with God's Good News of peace.
- ▶ The rather small *scutus*, or round shield = a faith in us that extinguish Satan's darts
- ▶ That Red-plumed helmet we always look for in the movies = salvation itself.
- ▶ Your *gladius*, or short sword for close-up combat = God's Word, the sword with the power of God's the Spirit in its blade.

But let's not get caught up in the imagery and miss the main point: These words issue a sober warning to every Christian. There are at work in this world the forces of hell, spiritual powers out to ruin human lives. In Biblical terms, no human being is your real enemy; even your enemies (socially speaking) are never The Enemy, and against him you and I are quite powerless. Therefore, cover yourself defensively and arm yourself offensively. With what? With the Good News that God has forgiven us in Christ, justified us in Christ, overcome death for us through Christ. In this military picture, Paul is saying, wrap your self, clothe yourself from head to foot, in the faith and understanding of the Gospel that he has given you by the Spirit. Don't just go to bed at night and think, I still believe the Gospel. Also get out of bed the next morning and live in the power of your Baptism.

As we turn now to think of how God strengthens us against the devil and preserves our souls, I want you to ask yourself this three-part question. (A) How faithfully do I attend to the public services of the Gospel, that is, to congregational preaching, to Vesper services, and to the Lord's

Supper? (B) How often do I take the opportunity to discuss our common faith and the struggles that we face with those close around me – my spouse, my children, my fellow Christians – outside of church? (C) What solitary habits of prayer and meditation, what private individual disciplines, have I cultivated for the strengthening of my faith?

I ask you this, not merely to make people feel guilty, but to remind you that, as Luther once put it so simply, “*the Gospel... offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way.*” And not least of these takes place when we pray not for ourselves but for each other. Notice how as Paul closes out he speaks of his own need for God’s strength, and for the Ephesians’ prayers. Despite its lyrical quality, Ephesians 6 is no rhapsody, but serious directives for the Church Militant from the man who once wrote:

The Lord... said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..." For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Who better to teach us in the name of the Crucified One to *be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*

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