Thank you, Grace Presbyterian Church Yorkton for the opportunity to speak today at your church. I am honored and grateful.

Today’s topic is “Be Strong in the Lord.” This phrase is found in the beginning of Paul’s final letter to his church in Ephesus in chapter 6. In verse 10 Paul commands: *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.”*

The word “finally” does indicate that Paul is bringing his letter to a conclusion, but it also communicates that this is what Paul wants his church members to devote themselves to in response to all that he has said (in the previous chapters) — Finally… devote yourselves to this, is the idea. Baugh, in his commentary on Ephesians, suggests that we use the word “henceforth” to bring the meaning of this Greek word across. “Henceforth, grow strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”, is the translation that he provides (Baugh, 538). “Finally,” that is to say, from now on and in light of all that I have said, “grow strong in the Lord.”

Notice that this is a command. “Be strong in the Lord,” the text says. We might also use the English word “grow” to bring across the progressive aspect of the Greek present tense. “Grow strong in the Lord” is the command. A Christian who is complacent, who is leaning back in their spiritual chair with their spiritual feet up, if you will, is disobeying this command. The Christian is always to be pursuing more maturity and strength in Christ. **Complacency in the Christian life is deadly.** Apathy is dangerous, for we are not at home — instead we are sojourners and exiles in this world. We are not living in peacetime — instead we are at war, as we will see. And so, I ask you, is there anything more dangerous than for a person to live as if there is peace all around when in reality there is a war raging outside, a fierce enemy at the gates? That person — a person who has grown complacent in war time — is in grave danger.

As Paul brings his letter to a conclusion, he wishes to leave his church members with something, and that is the command to grow strong. Do not grow weak, brothers and sisters, but instead grow strong in him. This is your responsibility. It is something that you must choose to do — and we must do it until the Lord calls us home. “Be strong in the Lord.”

That little phrase, “in the Lord,” is very important, for the Lord is the source of all true strength. Paul does not merely say, “be strong,” but “be strong in the Lord.” And to make the point clearer he adds these words, “and in the strength of his might.” We are not strong in ourselves. Any strength that we do have is from God. This is true even for those who do not believe in God, though they think otherwise. In pride, sinful men and women imagine themselves to be strong, when in reality they are very frail and weak. In fact, we humans are not only frail and weak, we are nothing apart from God. God is our Creator. We would not exist apart from him. And he is our sustainer. We would not continue to exist were it not for his preservation of us. He is the self-existent one. He is the one who has life in himself. But we are not these things. We owe our existence to God. And every breath we breathe is a gift from him*.* And yet so many live as if they themselves are strong, — in fact, they are weak. As the prophet Isaiah says, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:6–8).

The Christian knows this. The Christian understands that our existence is owed to God — he is our Creator and Sustainer. We confess that our life is in his hands, every breath is a gift, that he provides our daily bread, and that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

Thus, “be strong” here can be seen as is a command from Paul. Do not be content when you know that your faith is weakening. “Be strong.” But be sure to draw your strength, not from within, but from the Lord and the strength of his might**.**

One question that you might have is: how do we do this? It is one thing to say, *be* strong in the Lord — draw your strength from him — but how? How do we do this?

The Scriptures use a variety of terms and analogies to teach us what it means to grow strong in Christ. I’m thinking of that famous passage in John 15 where Christ exhorts his disciples to “abide” in him. Just as a branch cannot live apart from the vine, neither can we live — much less, bear fruit — apart from him. And how do we abide in Christ? By abiding in his word and by keeping his commandments. I’m reminded also of that parable that Jesus taught comparing the house built upon the sand and the house build upon the rock. While both had the appearance of strength at the beginning, only one was truly strong, for only one of those houses had a strong foundation. And how do we build our lives upon a strong foundation? Christ says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24). Again, to be strong in Christ is to hear his words, to believe and obey them.

Here in Ephesians Paul uses the analogy of armor to teach us how we are to grow strong in the Lord. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:10–11).

Here we find another command. The first was “be strong”, the second clarifies how we are to be strong: “Put on the whole armor of God”, the Apostle says.

The items of this armor, of these pieces of spiritual armor — the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet and sword — all have reference to Christ and his word in Paul’s analogy. The belt is the belt of truth. The breastplate is the breastplate of righteousness — Christ’s righteousness imputed to us and received by faith. The shoes are the preparedness of the gospel. The shield is the shield of faith. The helmet is the helmet of salvation. And the sword is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. So, **when Paul commands us to put on the armor of God he is commanding us to daily gird ourselves with Christ and his word.** We are to clothe ourselves with the truth of Christ, his righteousness, his gospel, our faith in him, and the salvation that is ours through him. The Christian is to take up the sword of the Spirit, that is, the word of God, so that he might fight with it. This is how we are to grow strong — by daily dressing ourselves for spiritual battle, which means that we are to take Christ and his word and apply it to our mind and heart, our waist and feet — indeed, to our whole being — so that we might be able to stand firm in him.

Now, let me share the three general observations about the command of verse 11 that I found.

*First*, Paul describes the armor that he commands us to put on as the armor “of God.” This does not mean that it is the armor that God wears, but that this is the armor that he provides. This is the spiritual armor that Christ wore in his earthly ministry. And this is the armor that God gives to his people — those who are united to Christ by faith. In Christ we have, not only the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and an eternal inheritance, but all that we need to live victoriously in this world. “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence…” (2 Peter 1:3). “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 gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31–32). One of the things that God has provided is armor.

*Second*, the Apostle commands the Christian — each and every Christian — to put on the whole armor of God. The English words, “whole armor” translate one Greek work, “πανοπλία” (panoplía). One Greek lexicon defines πανοπλία as “a complete set of instruments used in defensive or offensive warfare (usually, however, with emphasis upon defensive armament, including helmet, shield, breastplate) — ‘weapons and armor’”. The Lord’s army is well supplied. The armor that we have been given is a complete set.

*Third*, the Apostle commands Christian to put on this complete set of armor. God has provided it for you in Christ, but here Paul is commanding you to put it on. You must daily gird yourself for battle.

As I have shared, one of the principle ways that the Christian puts this spiritual armor on is through prayer. This is what Paul will eventually say. After elaborating on our spiritual armor, he says, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18). Daily and continual prayer is one of the principle ways that the Christian puts on this armor which God has supplied. As soldiers of the Lord, we are to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9–13). And when we speak to God in prayer, we must also allow him to speak to us through his word. **It is by receiving God’s word, believing and obeying it, and by speaking to God in prayer, that we do in fact put on this complete armor which God has supplied.**

If you do not believe that we have an enemy — if you are not convinced that there is a battle that rages in the spiritual realm — then you will not put on the armor of God. But if you understand that there is a war that rages between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light, then you will prepare for battle.

The devil is our spiritual adversary. He does not work alone, but through the angels who fell with him at the beginning of time and through the world that remains under his power.

Paul refers to the “schemes” of the devil. The devil is crafty and deceptive. He does not always attack head on, but often from behind or the side. He attacks in ways that we might not expect, and seeks to capitalize on our weakness. The Christian must remember that our enemy is cunning and deceptive. We must be ever on the lookout, therefore.

And Paul’s desire is to see us “stand.” There is of course a sense in which the church of Christ is to advance the kingdom of God in this world. This she is to do through the proclamation of the gospel, the planting of churches and discipleship of believers. Jesus promised that his church would advance in this world until he returns when he spoke to Peter saying, “you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). The kingdom of God will advance in this world. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. But here in this passage Paul is calling us to take a stand against the onslaughts of the evil one. Here the Christian is to recognize that they will always be under attack. “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). And again, in verse 13 he says, “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (Ephesians 6:13). The armor that God has provided is well suited for such a task. Armor for the body, a shield to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil and to deflect his blows, and sword to fight back with, so that we might withstand him in the evil day.

And in verse 12 the Apostle more precisely identifies our enemy when he says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” Paul says. If we did, then physical armor would do. But the battle is not physical, it is spiritual. And so, we must gird ourselves for spiritual battle with God’s spiritual armor. This spiritual battle does manifest itself in the physical realm, of course. The evil one is prince of this world. But the battle is heavenly and spiritual before it is physical, and we must never forget this.

May the Lord give us eyes to see. Help us to know for sure that there is a battle that rages all about us in the spiritual realm. May we be waking each day being mindful of our enemy who is crafty and fierce. And may we have the wisdom to dress for battle, lest we be overrun. May the Lord make us strong so that we might indeed stand firm in these evil days, for our good and His glory in us. Amen.