

We are wrapping up our study of Ephesians this month, so let's re-cap, about the instructions Paul gave in this "Letter to Live By." Paul instructs for the body of Christ to live in unity with one another, which we talked about the first Sunday of this month. The second Sunday, we learned the importance to love one another despite our divisiveness, and last Sunday, we talked about living wisely by choosing how we spend our time. And, "Finally," as Paul begins this passage, he says to "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." This is a great reminder because we cannot do all of these things in our own strength. No matter how hard we try to be unified, to love one another, and to live wisely, we cannot do it on our own. We'll talk today about how we obtain and use Christ's strength in our lives.

As we saw through the visual illustration during the scripture reading, this passage teaches us that God is our strength and our body armor that protects us, both personally and as the body of Christ. We are to put on the whole armor, not just one piece. We can't have full protection with just a helmet or a shield. We must surround ourselves with what these pieces of armor represent. We surround ourselves with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. This image, particularly as a Roman soldier in this context, is a good one that represents strength and power.

What I found interesting in this passage, is that it says for us to put on this armor, so we can "stand our ground," "stand firm," and "after we have done everything, stand." To be strong in the Lord does mean to stand firm and to stand our ground and to continue standing after the "flaming arrows" have come at us. But, to me, this seems like a passive image. It may be different to you, but to me, I have this visual of myself wearing all this bulky armor, that I can't move around very easily to dodge the

flaming arrows coming at me. I have to stand there and take it. Sometimes, we have to take the direct hits, and it's good to know that we have God as our strength despite these hits.

The scripture heading for this passage in the Message is "A Fight to the Finish." That doesn't sound very passive. Fighting is not passive. Maybe I have too many comedy sketches in mind that have used a person being stuck in body armor like this and finding it difficult to walk around, much less fight. Or, the creepy scenes in movies when there is an iron knight standing in the corner of a haunted house and then it suddenly moves or there are glowing eyes behind the helmet.

This isn't what Paul was trying to create as an image of strength. The Roman soldier was the epitome of strength during this time. All the armor did not slow down the soldier when it came to fight. The armor's protection actually helped the soldier be a better fighter. And, I think that's Paul's point here. Christ's strength is to help us be a better fighter.

And, this again, is where the warrior image gets lost on me. I'm a lover, not a fighter. It may really speak to you though, and that's great. My point is that not every image or verse in the Bible has the same meaning or impact for everyone. And, that's ok. That's why there are so many different images and metaphor in the Bible, so we can find what does speak to us. That is how we make faith relevant to us personally. That's how we can apply scripture to our lives in this day and time.

Many times, people refer to the Bible as their sword, and I grew up having "sword drills" in Sunday School, to see who could find the Bible passage the fastest. Verse 17 tells us to "Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," and that's why some people refer to the word of God as their sword. For a soldier, I would guess

that the sword is the most important part of the battle dress. It can be used to deflect the flaming arrows for protection, but it can also be used to defeat your opponent. It has a dual purpose – not just a passive protection.

Scripture can also have this power. We can learn about how scripture was originally meant in the context of ancient culture, and we can also apply it to our current culture and personal lives.

In one of my readings this week, I came across this quote about the Bible: “God has given us all we need in His flawless Word: When life wears us down, God’s Word blows the sweet breeze of refreshment. When we don’t know what to do, we find wisdom in God’s testimonies. When lies swirl around us, God’s Word brings a smile to our hearts. When we aren’t sure if we’re getting it right, God’s commandments open our eyes. The Bible is not a rulebook or required reading; it is an unlimited resource for real life.”¹

An unlimited resource for real life! The ultimate self-help book! In order for us to use this unlimited resource in our lives, in order to obtain Christ’s strength, we have to read scripture. For many people, the only time they read scripture, or even hear scripture read, is in Worship. And, with worship attendance dwindling, the word of God is not being used as source of knowledge or wisdom in our lives.

Learning how to read the Bible that allows God to speak to me directly through scripture, completely changed my life. I was taught to read the Bible literally, and it never made sense to me because I didn’t know the culture or the context the Bible was written in. That is one way reading the Bible – learn the culture and the context. It adds so much meaning to the passages. I hope I illustrated that by sharing what was

happening in the divisive culture in Ephesus, the backstory, to this letter from Paul. But, many of us don’t have the time or quite frankly the interest, to study the ancient culture and contexts.

The way to read the Bible that changed my life is called *Lectio Divina*, which means divine reading. It’s an ancient practice, but one that will make your faith relevant, it will grow your faith, and it will give you the strength to face any obstacle. This is how it works: we first begin in prayer, by asking the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to hear what God has to say to us today. Then, we read a particular scripture, listening and being open to any word or phrase that catches us, that makes an impression on us. We then reflect and meditate on that word or image. Ask God what that means for us personally. Reflect on how that applies in our lives at this specific moment. We could reread the passage again to see if another word or phrase jumps out at us, or we can read it in a different translation. Sometimes, hearing the same thing in a different way, can really make a difference on how we receive what God is telling us.

We can do a follow-up spiritual practice called scripture journaling, where we explore further what God has revealed to us by writing it down. We learn by doing, so take out your bulletin insert titled *Scripture Journaling*. We’ll walk through this together. I will read our passage again, and this time, listen to what God has for you in this scripture.

[Pray, then read Ephesians 6:10-20 in the *Message*].

On your insert, under *S*, write down the word, verse or phrase of **scripture** that stood out to you. Don’t overthink it. If nothing jumped out at you, then write that.

¹ Katy McCown, First 5 devotional, 8/22/2018.

Next, under O, make an **observation** about what that scripture passage says about God, life, humanity, etc.

Then, under A...explore how this word or phrase or image **applies** to your life personally? How will you be different today because of what you read or heard?

Lastly, write a short **prayer** about this experience. It could be a prayer of gratitude, a prayer of confession, a prayer that asks for further clarification. Do that now.

This spiritual practice may take practice in learning how to listen and how to trust the Spirit's leading. You have to be open to whatever God gives you, and explore why God is giving you this word at this time. You can further discern this through prayer and through small group conversations. If you truly are in some things that you cannot handle alone and you need God's strength, guidance, and wisdom, do this spiritual practice. Read scripture this way and be open to how God can apply scripture to your life. I know many of you have travel plans for the fall, this is something you can do anytime and anywhere. If you aren't sure about how to do this practice alone, let's do it in small groups. There's another bulletin insert that you can fill out to tell your available times. We can form groups based on your schedules.

If we are to use the Bible as an unlimited resource, we have to read it and apply it to our lives. This sword is our strength, by helping us be prepared when the flaming arrows come at us and to stand strong against them in our faith. This sword has a dual purpose – to protect us and to defeat the opposing forces. This is how we can be active in obtaining Christ's strength and becoming strong in the Lord. Take up

your sword and let God transform you through the reading of his Word. Amen.