



Have any of you ever seen a bracelet like this? I know I've seen them on a few of your wrists. These yellow bands with the words "Live Strong" were started by cyclist Lance Armstrong and Nike in 2004 as a marketing tool to raise funds for cancer awareness and research. Selling them at \$1/band, the goal was to raise \$25 million. They reached their goal within six months. To date, over 70 million wristbands have been sold.

I'd like to talk to you about these words – "live strong" – not because I've suddenly become an oncologist who can speak authoritatively on cancer. And no, I'm not endorsing Nike. Rather, it's basically those same words – Live Strong -- that God inspired Paul to write to the Ephesians. It's basically those same words – Live Strong -- that God inspired Paul to write to you.

There you are, gathered at your house church when there's a knock at the door. It's Tychichus, a messenger who has a scroll for you. As usual, you're excited to get mail. Your leader peels back the wax seal and begins reading. Your excitement escalates when you read the opening line, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus." It's been a while since you've heard from the beloved pastor whom God used to establish your congregation. You're anxious to hear what he has to say. The first paragraphs of his letter are just beautiful. They're saturated with sweet gospel messages that remind you of God's amazing grace. They remind you of why you're here praising God. Words like "Because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ." Words like, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourself, it's a gift of God." You are refreshed as Paul celebrates the unity you share in the Spirit and the bond of peace. Your soul is soaking in the sweetness of this inspired message.

But as the top half of the scroll starts to look a little bigger than the unread bottom part, the tone starts to shift. We can still hear the loving undertones of a pastoral voice. But now it's not so much of what God has done for us, rather, it's an encouragement on how we can live for God. How we can live God-pleasing lives as wives and husbands, as employers or employees, as children or as parents. How we can live a life worthy of our calling as Christians. And to be honest, it's starting to feel a bit uncomfortable. Yes, it's a pep talk, but it's always easier to listen to what God has done for us instead of listening to what God expects from us. Our minds begin to drift. We think about our shortcomings in our different roles: how we've fallen short as a spouse, how we haven't been the perfect boss or the most obedient child. But then just like that we're brought back to the letter when we hear the word, "Finally."

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." -- Ephesians 6:10-13

Paul makes it sound so serious, doesn't he? Is it more serious than you and I often make it? Have you been coasting through life without giving much thought about the battle that is waging over your soul? When's the last time we've really thought about how we are engaged in a war that's taking place in a whole other dimension? Oh, we find ourselves fighting. We struggle over things. We wrestle over how we need to have tough conversations with a family member. We lie awake at night because we were on the receiving end of some mean-spirited and misguided words. We sweat over presentations we have to make at work or job interviews we have scheduled. This time of year we worry about heading off to college or our kids heading off to college. All those things are real challenges and I appreciated Pastor Scharf's words last week as he said, "Think about one thing that is weighing on your mind. Look at the stars like Abraham did and know that God promises to make that one thing work out for your good." That was so comforting to hear.

What was your thing? Or if you weren't here, what would be your thing? I'd venture to say, 90, 95%, or maybe even 100% of us were thinking about the here and the now. We were thinking about things of this world. And that's ok. God addresses and has magnificent promises for the things of this world. But what about our struggle against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms? How many of our thoughts and prayers are devoted towards those things? Are we prepared, as Paul encourages here, to put on the full armor of God to stand up against those things? Or has Satan schemed so successfully into our lives, letting us to stand our ground about matters of "flesh and blood" only to chop us at the knees when it comes to spiritual matters.

It's amazing, and yet scary, how the devil is so smooth. Sure, at times he's an intimidating force who gets in our face and scares us so that we just want to run away from him. Or he's that angry district attorney who thrusts accusations at us, shooting his fiery arrows at our record. But more often than not, he's that deceptive snake who slithers into our lives and distracts us from the things we really need to be concerned about. Where has the devil slithered into your life and gotten you to concentrate on something less dangerous so that you don't even see him poised and ready to strike with his venomous fangs? Is he using the disobedience of your three-year-old? The complaining of your spouse? Your overbearing boss? Your crammed schedule? Whatever it is, before you know it, we've long forgotten or have long written off thinking that the devil and his cohorts are the real enemy. He lulls us to spiritual relaxation, so that scope is taken off of him and aimed at something else.

It reminds me of a conversation between two Sunday Schoolers. After learning about the Temptation of Jesus in the desert, the two boys were walking back to church to meet their parents when one asked, "Do you believe all that stuff about the devil?" To which the other replied, "Naah... the devil is just like Santa Claus, it's your dad." We may not go so far as saying the devil is our dad, we may not go so far as saying the devil isn't real, but few, if any of us, regard him with the real danger that he poses. Which is why God exhorts us today, "Live strong." Or he actually says, "Be strong."

Now that exhortation, "Be strong" can only take you so far, much like this little wristband. I'm all for optimism and a willingness to fight. In the medical field, experts will often credit a person's positive attitude as an important ingredient in their recovery. God encourages us to be positive and to pray boldly, even for earthly blessings. But in the end, wearing a little yellow band that says, "Live strong," will not take away cancer. In the end, our attitude – no matter how positive it is -- will not cure us. God may, in his wisdom, cure us. But just living strong doesn't erode tumors.

In the same vain, being strong, living strong in our life of gratitude towards God, will not ward off the devil. In fact, it may even invite him to attack more fiercely. Being strong, living strong in our life of thanksgiving is not a foolproof way to equip us to stand our ground in the end. Eventually, one of the devil's accusing arrows will hit home. One of the devil's cunning tricks will get us to fall, if we're simply being strong in ourselves. Which is why it's so important to not cut the Lord's Word short. It says, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power."

The only way that the devil's fiery arrows fail to reach us is when we find ourselves living in this middle of this sphere that we call Jesus. His strength, his might, his power, are what surround us and keep us safe. Rest assured, it is not up to you or to me to defeat Satan in this bloody battle – that was up to Christ. His strength was too much for the devil to handle. The devil tried, tempting Jesus with hunger and riches and fame, to name the least. But Jesus' strength which was rooted in the Word prevailed. Jesus' might refused to let him give up when he found himself in difficult situations, such as the one he faced in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was sweating drops of blood. The devil was there, attacking and trying to detour Jesus from going to the cross, but Jesus' might kept him going forward. And know that that same determination of his might is what Jesus uses to hold on to you as the devil tries to rip you away from Christ's hand. As far as his power – think of it like turbo boost in a car. You're cruising along the highway and you need to pass somebody. As you see that oncoming traffic getting closer, you step on it and all of a sudden you zoom past the slower car and get back into your lane. Christ's power is our passing gear, the gear that equips us stand our ground when the day of evil comes. His power, which showed itself most gloriously in the empty tomb, the Bible says is the same power by which you will live forever. And it's that same power which God points to today as something you have at your disposal. It's the same power by which you can live strong. Amen.