

# JBTS

VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF  
BIBLICAL AND  
THEOLOGICAL  
STUDIES

EPHESIANS AND THE POWERS

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and Standing Firm against the 'Powers'  
(Ephesians 6:10–20)**

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# **The Armor of God, the Gospel of Christ, and Standing Firm against the ‘Powers’ (Ephesians 6:10–20)**

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**Abstract:** As the climactic conclusion to the letter, Ephesians 6:10–20 recapitulates and summarizes much of the earlier themes in Ephesians. It clarifies that the “powers” are evil, supernaturally power, spiritual beings. Christians must therefore stand firm against the “powers” by resting in Christ’s redemptive work for them. Christ is seen as the Divine Warrior whose victory over the “powers” is the armor that Christians are called to put on and appropriate by virtue of their union with Christ by faith.

**Key Words:** powers, Divine Warrior, union with Christ, stand firm, armor of God

## **Introduction**

Among the letters of Paul,<sup>1</sup> Ephesians focuses most clearly on the topic of the “powers,” particularly their existence, dominion over the world, hostility towards the church, and subjugation under the authority of Christ. Moreover, Ephesians 6:10–20 plays a large role in unfolding this topic, not only because of its climactic place at the end of the letter but also because of the manner in which the pericope recapitulates and summarizes much of the preceding material on the “powers.” For this reason, it is appropriate to analyze closely the pericope, with a view to grasping the identity of the “powers” and Paul’s prescription for standing against them successfully.

On the basis of this analysis, I will argue that in Ephesians 6:10–20 Paul teaches that the “powers” are evil, supernaturally powerful, spiritual beings, and that because of their existence and hostility towards the church, Christians must stand firm against them in the strength the Lord provides in the gospel. Specifically, Christians should remember and rest in Christ’s redemptive work for them, which by virtue of their union with Christ will in its application to them result in successful resistance against all kinds of temptations and trials. Putting on the armor of God

1. The Pauline authorship of Ephesians is debated. Although I am convinced of Pauline authorship, the question need not detain us, for the focus of this chapter is on the meaning of Ephesians 6:10–20 within the letter, regardless of authorship. In keeping with the letter’s own claim, I will use the name “Paul” to refer to the author of the letter.

means, then, appropriating the gospel of Christ afresh throughout the Christian life, which will undergird and propel Christians to stand firm against the “powers.”

In order to demonstrate this thesis, I will analyze the relationship between Ephesians 6:10–20 and the rest of the letter, as well as the structure of the pericope. This will set the stage for a closer analysis of the identity of the “powers” (Eph 6:12) as well as Paul’s prescription for standing firm against them.

## **The Relationship of Ephesians 6:10–20 to the Rest of the Letter**

The literary significance of Ephesians 6:10–20 is widely recognized. While some argue it summarizes the ethical section of the letter (4:1–6:9),<sup>2</sup> others contend it summarizes the entire letter.<sup>3</sup> In either case, the pericope is rightly seen as having a summative function for much of the preceding material. The significance of the pericope is seen in the use of adverbial λοιπός (“finally”) in 6:10, the place of the pericope at the end of the letter, and the pericope’s verbal links with the rest of the letter.

Paul regularly, although by no means always, concludes his letters with adverbial λοιπός, as he does in 6:10 (cf. 2 Cor 13:11; Gal 6:17; Phil 4:8; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 3:1).<sup>4</sup> The word functions rhetorically to catch the attention of the audience so as to highlight what is about to follow, and in the case of 6:10–20 points to its summative character.

Additionally, 6:10–20 concludes the body of the letter. Jeffrey Weima has shown that the way Paul concludes his letters often communicates or summarizes the main themes of the letter.<sup>5</sup> One does not have to subscribe to a Greco-Roman rhetorical-critical approach in order for this to be recognized. In light of this

2. Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 435.

3. Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 335–36; Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 411. Andrew T. Lincoln (*Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990], 432) thinks Ephesians 6:10–20 functions rhetorically as the *peroratio* and concludes both 4:1–6:9 and the body of the letter as a whole. Cf. Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 585–86.

4. Some early Greek manuscripts of the Alexandrian text-type have the genitive τοῦ λοιποῦ, whereas others in the Western and Byzantine tradition have the accusative τὸ λοιπόν. The meaning is not affected in either case, although the former is more likely due to the early date of the manuscripts (rightly Thielman, *Ephesians*, 430; contra Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002], 819n1). Thielman (*Ephesians*, 416–17) suggests the phrase is an ellipsis for τοῦ λοιποῦ χρόνου and thus means “from now on,” indicating that Christians should forget what is past and look to stand strong for Christ in the future; cf. BDF §186.2 [Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961)].

5. Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “The Pauline Letter Closings: Analysis and Hermeneutical Significance,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 177–198. Cf. idem, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 101 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

observation, it is likely that Paul intended 6:10–20 to be the climactic imperative of the letter. Weima’s point is worth quoting in full:

A Pauline letter closing is not an insignificant epistolary convention, simply designed to maintain contact with the addressees (although that goal is surely part of its intended purpose). Rather, it is a carefully constructed unit, shaped and adapted in such a way as to relate it directly to the major concerns of the letter as a whole, and so it provides important clues to understanding the key issues addressed in the body of the letter. Thus the Pauline letter closing functions much like the thanksgiving section, but in reverse. For as the thanksgiving foreshadows and points ahead to the major concerns to be addressed in the body of the letter, so the closing serves to highlight and encapsulate the main points previously taken up in the body. And this recapitulating function of Paul’s letter closings, in turn, provides interpretive clues for a richer understanding of their respective letters.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Weima’s focus is on the conventional aspects of a letter closing, his points are still broadly applicable to a pericope that concludes the body of a letter and transitions to the letter closing, such as we find in Ephesians 6:10–20 (cf. Gal 6:11–18).<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Frank Thielman rightly says of this passage, “Paul subtly sums up what the readers of the letter must do in order to fulfill their role in God’s plan to unite all things in Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Ephesians 6:10–20 has numerous verbal links with the rest of the letter, suggesting it is summarizing or recapitulating much of the letter’s content.<sup>9</sup>

6. Weima, “The Pauline Letter Closings,” 183.

7. For a helpful distinction between a “letter closing” and a “closing to the letter body” with reference to Galatians 6:11–17, see Jeff Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation: The Strategic Purpose of Galatians 6:11–17*, Library of New Testament Studies 508 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 11–13. Ephesians 6:10–20 serves more accurately as a “closing to the letter body” than a “letter closing” *per se*.

8. Thielman, *Ephesians*, 414.

9. Contra Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 817. In order to sustain his chiasmic structure of Ephesians, John Paul Heil (*Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ*, Studies in Biblical Literature 13 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007], 39–40) recognizes only the verbal links with Ephesians 1.

What follows is a tabulation of the verbal links:

<b>Ephesians 6:10–20</b>	<b>The Rest of the Letter</b>
6:10 the strength of his might <sup>10</sup>	1:19 the strength of his might
6:11 put on the whole armor of God	4:24 put on the new self
6:11 the schemes of the devil	4:14 deceitful schemes 4:27 give no opportunity to the devil
6:12 the rulers . . . the authorities	1:21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion 2:2 following the authoritative ruler of the air 3:10 the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places
6:12 cosmic powers over this present darkness . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places	2:2 following the course of this world . . . the spirit that is now at work 5:8, 11 for at one time you were darkness . . . Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10 in the heavenly places
6:13 the evil day	5:16 the days are evil
6:14 the belt of truth . . . the breastplate of righteousness	1:13 the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation 4:15 speak the truth in love 4:21 as the truth is in Jesus 4:24 in righteousness and holiness that comes from the truth 4:25 let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor 5:9 for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true
6:15 the gospel of peace	2:14–17 For he himself is our peace . . . so making peace . . . And he came and proclaimed the gospel of peace

10. The biblical quotations in this chart are the author's own translation.

6:16 the shield of faith	<p>1:15 faith in the Lord Jesus</p> <p>2:8 by grace you have been saved through faith</p> <p>3:12 we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him</p> <p>3:17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith</p> <p>4:5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism</p> <p>4:13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God</p>
6:17 the helmet of salvation	<p>1:13 the gospel of your salvation</p> <p>2:5, 8 by grace you have been saved</p>
6:18 praying at all times	<p>1:16 remembering you in my prayers (cf. 1:17–23; 3:14–21)</p>
6:19 to make known the mystery of the gospel	<p>1:9 making known to us the mystery of his will</p> <p>3:4–6 the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations . . . This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs . . . in Christ Jesus through the gospel</p> <p>5:32 this mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church</p>

This table shows the close relationship between 6:10–20 and the rest of the letter. Certain phrases or words therefore recall or summarize the focus of earlier texts. For instance, the phrase “the strength of his might” only occurs in 1:19 and 6:10, suggesting a close link between those texts. The only occurrences of the verb ἐνδύω (“to put on”) in Ephesians are in 4:24 and 6:11, 14, suggesting a close relationship between putting on the new person and putting on the armor of God. In some cases, the entire verse or verses collectively serve to summarize multiple texts earlier in the letter. In the case of 6:12, for instance, the four prepositional phrases describing the enemy summarize what has been said about them earlier in the letter, such as their authority (1:21), non-physicality (2:2, “spirit”), locale (3:10, “in the heavenly places”), and domain (2:2, “world,” “air”). Similarly, the phrase “mystery of the gospel” (6:19) probably is Paul’s shorthand for his explication of the “mystery of Christ” elsewhere in the letter (1:9–10; 3:3–6; 5:32).

Especially significant are the verbal links in 6:14–17 with the terms: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. While not synonymous, these terms are closely related because they are christologically defined and linked inextricably with the gospel. For instance, the term “truth” (ἀλήθεια) is christological (4:21, “the truth is in Jesus”) and gospel-oriented (1:13, “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation”), which gives rise to right living before God and others (4:15, 24–25; 5:9). Similarly, while the phrase “gospel of peace” alludes to Isaiah 52:7, it is defined by the earlier context of Ephesians 2:11–22, which emphasizes that Jesus himself is our peace in that he brings us peace with God and one another through his sacrificial death on the cross. Again, the object of the Christian’s faith is explicitly said to be “in the Lord Jesus” (1:15) and is therefore the means by which we are saved and have access into God’s presence (2:8; 3:12). The notion of salvation also is clearly linked with the gospel (1:13) and God’s grace that brings us new life in Christ (2:4–10). Hence, these terms that comprise the armor of God in 6:14–17 recall the teaching earlier in the letter regarding the gospel of Christ and its effects in the lives of believers. In fact, one might even go so far as to say that all the major terms descriptive of the gospel and its effects in Ephesians appear in 6:14–17 as the armor of God. The absence of the phrase “in Christ” from 6:10–20 does not, therefore, detract from the christological focus of the text, for Paul already clarified earlier in the letter that the gospel and its benefits come to the Christian only through union with Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, because of the use of the term “finally” in 6:10, the summative function of Paul’s letter closings and the closings of the letter body, and the verbal links with the rest of the letter, it is likely that 6:10–20 is a summary or recapitulation

11. Rightly Donna R. Reinhard, “Ephesians 6:10–18: A Call to Personal Piety Or Another Way of Describing Union with Christ?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 521–32. Contra Best, *Ephesians*, 587.



of the entire letter, or at the very least, a climactic response based on the letter's content as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

### The Structure of Ephesians 6:10–20

A discourse analysis of the text reveals that the structure of 6:10–20 is fairly straightforward. The outline of the text is as follows.

- 6:10 Be strong in the Lord (*imperative; main command*)
- 6:11 Put on the armor of God (*imperative; restatement of main command*)
  - In order to **stand** (*purpose*)
- 6:12 Because we fight against cosmic powers (*ground of 6:11, 13*)
- 6:13 Therefore take up the armor of God (*imperative; restatement of 6:11*)
  - In order to resist and **stand** (*purpose*)
- 6:14 Therefore **stand** (*imperative; inference from 6:11, 13*)
  - Belt of truth
  - Breastplate of righteousness
- 6:15 Feet prepared by/for the gospel of peace
- 6:16 Shield of faith
  - In order to quench the devil's fiery darts (*purpose*)
- 6:17 Helmet of salvation
  - Sword of the Spirit = God's word
- 6:18–20 Prayer
  - In order for the mystery of the gospel to be made known (*purpose*)

The main command is that Christians should be strong in the Lord (6:10). The asyndetic command to put on God's armor in 6:11 probably restates the initial command and adds the element of God's armor.<sup>13</sup> The reason for armor is given in 6:12, which then gives rise to Paul's restatement of the command in 6:13. Both 6:11 and 6:13 include purpose clauses that utilize the complementary infinitive *σῆναι* ("to stand") with the verb *δύναμαι* ("be able"). That is to say, the main point, goal,

12. Contra John Muddiman (*The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries [London: Continuum, 2001], 282–84), who suggests that the passage adds new instruction for the Christian young men of Ephesus (cf. 1 John 2:12–14).

13. BDF §462.2: "Although asyndeton lends solemnity and weight to the words, it is not a conscious rhetorical device." Additionally, it can have an explanatory force, as in 6:11.



or purpose of 6:10–13 is that Christians would have the *ability to stand* in the midst of battle. The significance of standing is clear not only from its repetition in 6:11–13<sup>14</sup> but also from its reappearance in 6:14 as the dominant imperative in the rest of the passage.<sup>15</sup> What follows in 6:14–20 is a string of post-verbal adverbial participles, which Steven Runge suggests “elaborate the action of the main verb, often providing more specific explanation of what is meant by the main action.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, putting on the specific components of the armor of God is an *elaboration* of what it means to “stand.” More specifically, the specific components of the armor are the *necessary means* by which Christians will have the ability to stand in battle.<sup>17</sup>

If this analysis of the structure of 6:10–20 is correct, then the main point of the passage is that Christians should be strong in the Lord and put on the armor of God so that they will be able to stand firm against the “powers.”

### **Identifying the “Powers”**

Now that we have identified the relationship of Ephesians 6:10–20 to the rest of the letter, as well as outlined its structure and basic message, we can focus more precisely on the identity of the “powers.” For our purposes regarding the portrayal of the “powers” in Ephesians, Ephesians 6:10–20 is a crucial text, for it is the most sustained discussion of the “powers” in Ephesians, and it is the only place in Ephesians where Paul suggests how to wage war against the “powers.” Its function is to draw together and summarize the mention of the “powers” earlier in the letter. Prior to 6:10–20, the “powers” explicitly appear in three texts: 1:21; 2:2; and 3:10.<sup>18</sup> In 1:21, there are four terms that unpack the “powers”: “rule” (ἀρχή), “authority” (ἐξουσία), “power” (δύναμις), and “dominion” (κυριότης). The following phrase (“and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come”) shows that these four terms are not meant to be exhaustive but rather representative of the kinds of “powers” that be. In 2:2 the devil is likely alluded to as the “prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (τὸν ἄρχοντα τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος, τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ νῦν ἐνεργοῦντος ἐν τοῖς υἱοῖς τῆς ἀπειθείας). The verbal link between 1:21 and 2:2 is the word ἐξουσία, suggesting that the “powers” in 1:21 are hostile to God, over whom the devil is the “prince.”

14. Notice its appearance even in the compound verb ἀντιστῆναι (“to withstand,” Eph 6:13).

15. The verb δέξασθε (“receive,” Eph 6:17) appears as an imperative instead of a participle to clarify that in Ephesians 6:17 Paul resumes the list of the armor. Hence, it is not another dominant imperative in the pericope (similarly Arnold, *Ephesians*, 440).

16. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 262.

17. Rightly Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 337. Hoehner (*Ephesians*, 838) suggests the aorist here depicts causality.

18. The devil (διάβολος) is also explicitly mentioned in 4:27.

In 3:10 God's wisdom is said to be made known to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (ταῖς ἀρχαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἐξουσίαις ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις). The terms ἀρχή and ἐξουσία recall their appearance in 1:21, suggesting the same hostile "powers" are in view. The new element that 3:10 adds is that their dwelling is also "in the heavenly places," even though 1:21 clarified that Christ's exaltation is "far above" them in those same heavenly places. Hence, the key words describing the "powers" are ἀρχή and ἐξουσία (1:21; 2:2; 3:10), with the devil also described as the ἄρχων and πνεῦμα (2:2). Their domain is "the air" (2:2) and "the heavenly places" (3:10).

In addition to the explicit texts referring to the "powers," Ephesians describes the reality of evil with the words "world" (κόσμος, 2:2, 12), dark/darkness (σκοτός/σκοτία, 5:8, 11; cf. 4:18), and "evil" (πονηρός, 5:16). The "world" is a spatial term referring to the fallen place in which the present evil age reigns, and "darkness" is descriptive of the current fallen state experienced by those who belong to the "world." The ongoing nature of the present age is stated in 5:16: "the days are evil."

In keeping with its function in the letter, Ephesians 6:10–20 draws together and summarizes this prior material, which not only brings the letter's theme of the "powers" to a rhetorical climax but also clarifies their identity. All the major terms descriptive of the "powers" in Ephesians appear in this text: ἀρχή, ἐξουσία, κόσμος (compounded with the noun κράτωρ, "power"), σκοτός, πονηρία/πονηρός, and διάβολος (6:11–13, 16). The fourfold description of the "powers" in 6:12 recalls the fourfold description in 1:21, except 6:12 clarifies and heightens the element of hostility associated with them. No longer can the interpreter consider the "rulers and authorities" of 1:21 and 3:10 to be benign, for they reappear in 6:12 as those against whom Christians struggle. Moreover, the latter two phrases—"against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"—clarify the deep hostility of these forces, for they are associated with and in some sense rule over the present evil age and its darkness. Since the term "cosmic power" is a *hapax legomenon* in Paul's letters (cf. *T. Sol.* 8:2; 18:2), and since Paul never elsewhere uses the neuter plural τὰ πνευματικά ("spiritual forces"), their inclusion in the list gives the appearance that Paul is piling up terms for rhetorical effect to show the mighty force of the enemy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, each of the four prepositional phrases is longer than the previous one, such that by the end of the list

19. Similarly, Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 444–45; Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 340. The attempt by some interpreters (e.g., Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 289) to discern a hierarchy of demonic beings appears to be mere speculation.

one has a heightened and full-orbed description of the beings as evil, dark, powerful, authoritative, and, in some sense, heavenly or otherworldly.<sup>20</sup>

Ephesians 6:12 clarifies not only the hostility of the “powers” but also their identity as supernatural spiritual beings.<sup>21</sup> The reason Christians should be strong in the Lord and put on God’s armor (6:10–11) is because their struggle is not ultimately with their fellow human beings but with supernatural, spiritual beings hostile to God and God’s people (6:12). The phrase “flesh and blood” is an idiom descriptive of human beings, particularly those who either belong to this fallen age or experience its deleterious effects.<sup>22</sup> Paul’s denial that the Christian struggle is with “flesh and blood” signifies that the “powers,” however one defines them, cannot be limited to human beings. The term “spiritual forces” (τὰ πνευματικά) is thus set in contrast with “flesh and blood,” and, like the devil’s descriptor as a “spirit” in 2:2 (πνεῦμα), describes the non-physicality of the Christian’s enemy.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, these “powers” are located “in the heavenly places,” so whatever existence they have on earth does not lessen their reality as in some sense heavenly (yet evil) beings.<sup>24</sup>

Yet another indication of the identity of the “powers” comes from the historical background of Ephesus. As Clinton Arnold has shown, Ephesus was a center for Hellenistic magic practices, and Artemis in particular was linked with these practices as the supreme ruler and goddess. This background elucidates why Paul described the “powers” more often in Ephesians than in any other of his

20. This point assumes the originality of the text as it appears in modern critical editions of Ephesians (e.g., NA28, TGNT). The length of the phrases in the Greek is as follows:

πρὸς τὰς ἀρχάς = 12 letters

πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας = 15 letters

πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου = 37 letters

πρὸς τὰ πνευματικά τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις = 44 letters

21. Rightly Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 341.

22. See BDAG: 26 [Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*; 3rd ed.; rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)]; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:50; Galatians 1:16. Even though in Ephesians 6:12 the terms are reversed (literally “blood and flesh”), the collocation seems to depict the same reality.

23. So, Arnold, *Ephesians*, 447–49; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 828–29; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 420. Paul’s choice of the grammatically neuter adjective πνευματικά is not an argument for the impersonal nature of these beings. For as BDF §138.1 states, “The neuter is sometimes used with reference to persons if it is not the individuals but a general quality that is to be emphasized.” That is, Paul’s choice of a neuter adjective owes to his desire to depict the “general quality” of the beings, not to denude them of personhood. For a discussion of the nature of angelic or demonic beings as “spirits,” see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 463; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 397. Cf. Hebrews 1:14.

24. For an assessment of the textual variations of the phrase “in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12) and some of the patristic interpretations of the phrase, see Christopher J. A. Lash, “Where Do Devils Live? A Problem in the Textual Criticism of Ephesians 6:12,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976): 161–174. Cf. Best, *Ephesians*, 594–95; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 829–31.

epistles.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the Ephesians would have been well familiar with Paul's notion of the "powers" as supernatural and malevolent spiritual beings. That Paul did not deny their existence in Ephesians but showed Christ's victory over them is a powerful silence.<sup>26</sup>

None of this is to deny that there are earthly counterparts or manifestations, so to speak, of these beings. Nor is it to deny that the effect of their rule inevitably manifests itself in sinful desires and actions within human beings and human institutions (Eph 2:2–3). Yet when we consider the manner in which Paul refers to the "powers" in Ephesians, any detectable demythologizing of the "powers" is of the sort that puts the "powers" in their proper perspective, namely, as beings whose power is limited both in degree and duration in comparison to God's infinite power and reign. Indeed, the "powers" were defeated by Christ (Eph 4:8), and over them Christ is now far and above exalted (Eph 1:20–23). At the same time, in comparison to human power, the "powers" are untamable and hold the unbelieving world in their sway. These beings, whose existence was attested already in the OT (e.g. 1 Sam 16:14; Dan 10:13), wield their power for dark purposes while the present evil age remains.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Ephesians is certainly not dualistic, for God is sovereign over the "powers," yet it also does not fall into anti-supernaturalism as though the "powers" do not exist in the heavenly places. Indeed, because the "powers" are supernatural beings, Christians must take up not their own armor but the armor of God.

### Standing against the "Powers"

As indicated earlier, the main command in Ephesians 6:10–20 is that Christians should be strong in the Lord, which is expressed in terms of putting on God's armor (6:10–11). But the purpose or goal of the pericope is that Christians would be able to "stand," as evident from the purpose clauses in 6:11, 13, the use of *στήτε* ("stand") as the dominant imperative in 6:14–20, and the inferential conjunction *οὖν* ("therefore") in 6:14. That is to say, the reason Paul wrote Ephesians 6:10–20 is so that Christians would be able to stand against the "powers."

The question is: If the "powers" are as supernatural and untamable as they appear to be (6:12), and if the devil attempts to bring fiery trials upon Christians through his manifold schemes (6:16), then how will Christians be able to stand firm successfully? The answer is that Christians can and certainly will stand firm

25. Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 1–40.

26. Similarly, Best, *Ephesians*, 588.

27. In this sense, the worldview of Ephesians is the same as that of Job, whose Behemoth and Leviathan likely refer to Death and Satan, respectively; both are untamable to Job but are controlled by God alone (see Robert S. Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You: Images of Creation and Evil in the Book of Job*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 12 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002]).

by resting in and appropriating by faith the redemptive work of Christ for them, which by virtue of their union with Christ will in its application to them result in successful resistance against all kinds of temptations and trials. This is evident from Paul's emphasis in the text on union with Christ and from his allusions to OT Divine Warrior texts.

## **Union with Christ**

In Ephesians 6:10 Paul indicates that Christians are to find their strength "in the Lord and in the strength of his might." When the verb ἐνδυναμῶ ("to strengthen") is used in the middle or passive voice, it is rendered intransitively: "to be strong." Further, when it is followed by the dative case or by ἐν ("in") + prepositional object, the dative noun or prepositional object describes the content or the means by which a person is strong. Often the content or means is a thing such as faith (Rom 4:20) or grace (2 Tim 2:1). In 6:10, however, the content or means is a person (the Lord), and only after naming the person does Paul mention what that person can provide (divine strength). By mentioning the person first, Paul emphasized that the only means by which Christians can find supernatural strength to stand against the "powers" is by their association or union with the Lord.

The phrase ἐν κυρίῳ ("in the Lord"), which Paul uses fifty-four times throughout his letters, connotes a mode of existence experienced by Christians, who by their faith have been joined to the Lord Jesus. The anarthrous κυρίῳ ("Lord") is a qualitative noun that thus emphasizes the quality of Jesus' lordship and authority in the lives of Christians. The use of ἐν ("in") is likely associative or locative, indicating the Christian's proximity and association with Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the phrase is applicable to Christians, for Jesus is not only Lord of all, but his lordship is especially manifest in the lives of Christians. Christians do all that they do for the sake of his name; they labor (Rom 16:12), marry (1 Cor 7:39), greet (1 Cor 16:19), bear witness (Eph 4:17), rejoice (Phil 3:1; 4:4), stand (Phil 4:1), and oversee (1 Thess 5:12) "in the Lord." That is to say, Christians live the entirety of their Christian lives under the lordship of Jesus, and the strength to live for him and stand against the "powers" derives from himself.

Moreover, since Ephesians 6:11 conceptually restates 6:10, putting on the armor of God likely is equivalent with being strong in the Lord. This is confirmed by a brief analysis of Paul's use of the verb ἐνδύω ("put on"). In Paul's literature, ἐνδύω occurs thirteen times, all having to do with what one wears or puts on.<sup>29</sup> In Paul's theology, the Christian's clothing is Christ and the effects of union with Christ. Paul teaches that all Christians have already put on Christ (Gal 3:27; Col 3:10) in that they have already been united to Christ and have experienced a decisive break with

28. So Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 821.

29. See Romans 13:12, 14; 1 Corinthians 15:53 (2x), 54 (2x); Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:24; 6:11, 14; Colossians 3:10, 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

their old lifestyle (cf. Rom 6:3–4). On the basis of union with Christ, Christians are to continue living in new ways, which is referred to as putting on “the new man” (Eph 4:24) or various virtues (Col 3:12; 1 Thess 5:8). The indicative precedes and motivates the imperative.

A text parallel to Ephesians 6:11 is Romans 13:12–14, in which Paul urges Christians to “put on the armor of light” (13:12), which from the following vice list must be seen as certain virtues (13:13). But then Paul commands in 13:14 that Christians “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” suggesting that putting on the armor of light is nothing other than putting on the Lord Jesus. The similarities between Romans 13:12–14 and Ephesians 6:11 suggest that in the latter, the command to put on the armor of God probably is synonymous with putting on Christ.<sup>30</sup> The Christian imperative to put on Christ means, as Douglas Moo puts it, “that we are consciously to embrace Christ in such a way that his character is manifested in all that we do and say.”<sup>31</sup>

## OT Divine Warrior Texts

In addition to Paul’s emphasis on union with Christ, his catalog of the armor of God recalls the OT theme of God as a Warrior who fights for his people. The OT is replete with references to God as a Warrior who fights for his people. In these accounts, the following motif frequently appears: Israel is oppressed and helpless, and God comes to rescue his people by judging their enemies. Because Israel is weak and God is strong, Israel need only trust in the Lord, and he will fight their battles for them (cf. Josh 6:1–27; 23:10; Judg 7:2–15; 1 Sam 17:46–47; 2 Kgs 7:6; Zech 10:5–12; 14:3).

The armor of God in Ephesians 6:10–20 recalls specifically Israel’s exodus from Egypt and Isaiah’s messianic and divine armor texts. The programmatic OT Divine Warrior text is the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. At the shore of the Red Sea when Pharaoh and his armies were bearing down on the Israelites, Moses encouraged the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today . . . The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Exod 14:13–14). This programmatic event leads into the Song of Moses, in which God is called “a man of war” (Exod 15:3). While it is difficult to establish a clear allusion to the exodus, it may be significant that, as in Ephesians 6:10–20, the crucial command for Israel was to “stand” (LXX: *στήτε*).<sup>32</sup> Like Israel, who, though weak, watched God defeat their enemies, so Christians, while intrinsically unable to

30. So, Arnold, *Ephesians*, 444.

31. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 825–26.

32. Similarly, there may be an allusion in Ephesians 6:14–15a to the Passover, for Israel was to eat the lamb “with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet” (LXX-Exod 12:11: αἱ ὀσφύες ὑμῶν περιεζωσμέναι, καὶ τὰ ὑποδήματα ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν ὑμῶν). If so, like Israel Christians stand firm, having prepared themselves at the time of their redemption (cf. Eph 1:7).

defeat the “powers,” are called to stand firm, having already experienced redemption through Christ.

Additionally, Ephesians 6:10–20 likely alludes to Isaiah’s divine armor texts.<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 11:1–5 describes the Messiah who would be from David’s lineage and would be filled with the Spirit (11:1–2). He would rule the nations with equity and justice (11:3–4). The foundation for his rule is described in terms reminiscent of Paul’s armor imagery: “Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (11:5).<sup>34</sup> The key for our purposes is to note that the armor is descriptive only of the Messiah.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in the context of Isaiah 1–12, his reign is set in contrast with Israel and King Ahaz, who refused to trust in the Lord and lacked righteousness and faithfulness (Isa 1:21; 5:7; 7:9).

Another divine armor text relevant to Ephesians 6:10–20 is the oracle of salvation in Isaiah 59:15b–21, for in it we find a description of God’s armor (cf. Wis 5:16–20). The extent of Israel’s sin was so great that they lacked even one person to intercede for them, as in former days (59:15b–16a; cf. Gen 18:22–33; Exod 33:12–16; Amos 7:1–6). Hence, Israel’s only hope for salvation was if God fought for them, and this is what he did: “[T]hen his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak” (59:16b–17). God’s battle would mean judgment for his enemies and salvation for his people (59:18–21). This passage is of obvious relevance to Ephesians 6:10–20, because it lists the armor of God in ways similar to Paul (breastplate of righteousness, helmet of salvation). As in Isaiah 11, the key for our purposes here is to note that the armor belongs to God and to God alone. The armor does not belong to Israel or any particular subset of individuals within Israel, for 59:15b–16 is clear that “there was no man” and “there was no one to intercede.” Only God was able to save Israel from their sins. His armor is described in terms of God’s attributes (righteousness, zeal) and actions (salvation, vengeance).<sup>36</sup>

These OT Divine Warrior texts consistently indicate that God is the one who fights for his people, and that the armor belongs to and derives from him. It is

33. Rightly Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 290–91; Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 338–39.

34. There are slight differences in order and description with Paul’s description of the armor. In Isaiah 11:5 righteousness (LXX: δικαιοσύνη) is the belt, and truth (LXX: ἀλήθεια) is the sash or loincloth. In Ephesians 6:14 truth is the belt, and righteousness is the breastplate. Peter Gentry rightly argues that the image of clothing around the Messiah’s waist shows that the clothing of righteousness and faithfulness form the foundation of the Messiah’s rule (Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 581).

35. Hence, Best (*Ephesians*, 591) is wrong to assert, “Christ is nowhere depicted as wearing the armor of our passage.”

36. It is possible Paul alludes to Isaiah 49:2 in Ephesians 6:17, in which God’s word is seen as a sharp sword coming out of the Servant’s mouth. If so, this is yet another indication that the armor belongs to Christ.



necessary for him to fight for his people, for his people are intrinsically weak (Exodus) and sinful (Isaiah). Hence, he is the source for redemption, and all his people need do is to look away from themselves and trust fully in his strength on their behalf.

## Resting in and Appropriating the Armor

When applied to Ephesians 6:10–20, these OT texts inform Paul’s choice and description of the armor, for he wanted to remind the Ephesians that God in Christ is their Warrior.<sup>37</sup> Paul calls the armor “the armor of God” because it belongs to God in Christ.<sup>38</sup> The first three pieces of armor—truth, righteousness, and the readiness to herald the gospel of peace—are christologically defined and oriented.<sup>39</sup> Truth is linked with Jesus (4:21), truth and righteousness are found in the one new man (4:24; cf. 2:15), and the original preacher of the gospel of peace is Jesus (2:17; cf. Acts 10:36). By virtue of their union with Christ, Christians benefit from his armor, but the armor does not derive from or belong to them in any sense apart from Christ. The gospel of Christ’s armor for them probably includes the Christian’s status before God and transformation by God.<sup>40</sup> That is, because of Christ those who belong to him have the status of having already been reconciled to God (Eph 2:13–18) and accounted by God as saints (Eph 1:1). At the same time, at their conversion Christians were definitively transformed by God so as to live in new-creational ways characterized by righteousness, truth, goodness, holiness, and peace with one another (Eph 2:10; 4:1–3, 23–25; 5:9). The gospel of Christ, then, protects a Christian in various ways from the dominion and onslaught of the “powers.”

The text’s emphasis on the gospel of God in Christ is why the latter three pieces of armor—faith, salvation, and God’s word—highlight that our strength is not in ourselves but in the Lord. In Ephesians 6:16, Paul syntactically highlights the necessity of exercising faith in Christ at every possible moment or circumstances (ἐν

37. The OT Divine Warrior texts do not nullify the salience of recognizing the background of a Roman soldier’s armor (see James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999], 175–76). However, since Paul does not provide a full description of a Roman soldier’s armor but alludes to OT Divine Warrior texts, probably the most salient background for the armor is the OT (so Arnold, *Ephesians*, 451; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 424).

38. Thus, τοῦ θεοῦ (“of God”) is a possessive genitive (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 442) or possibly a genitive of source (Arnold, *Ephesians*, 444; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 823).

39. Some interpreters suggest the order of the armor corresponds to stages of growth in the Christian life (e.g., Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 285–86). But these attempts appear forced onto the text and do not derive from it. It is difficult to be certain, but perhaps Paul moves from armor worn (belt, breastplate, shoes) to armor lifted (shield, helmet, sword). Theologically, while it is true that Christian growth is necessary, a Christian already possesses the entire armor at conversion by virtue of union with Christ.

40. Snodgrass (*Ephesians*, 341–42) avers the accent of the text is on the need for Christian action, not divine gift; cf. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 839–41. On the other hand, Best (*Ephesians*, 599) contends that the immediate context and Pauline use elsewhere demand that truth and righteousness be seen as the objective gospel and justifying righteousness from God.

πάντων, “in all circumstances”),<sup>41</sup> for faith links us with Christ, who by virtue of his ascended and mediatorial role as our king protects us from the devil’s temptations and trials. In Ephesians 6:17, Paul highlights eschatological salvation, which like faith is also seen as a piece of armor that protects the person (cf. 1 Thess 5:8). In the context, this protection is from the “powers,” although it likely includes protection from death, the world, and ultimately God’s wrath (Eph 2:1–22; 4:17–24; 5:6, 14).<sup>42</sup> The gracious character of salvation is clear, both because Paul says Christians are to “take/receive” (δέχομαι) it<sup>43</sup> and because the collocation of faith with salvation in Ephesians 6:16–17 echoes Paul’s prior teaching that salvation is by grace through faith and does not owe to human effort so that they cannot boast before God (Eph 2:8–9). The last item of armor is God’s word, which the Spirit wields as a sword (Eph 6:17). Again, Christians are enjoined to “receive” the sword, but Paul clarifies that the sword truly belongs to the Spirit, and the sword is God’s word, the gospel (cf. Heb 4:12).<sup>44</sup> The focus is therefore not on what belongs to or derives from the Christian but on God. It is the Triune God who protects the Christian from the “powers,” and it is the Triune God who enables the Christian to stand against the “powers.” Finally, Paul’s emphasis on prayer in Ephesians 6:18–20 must be interpreted as integral to the pericope, not because prayer is an additional piece of armor, but because prayer is the necessary means by which Christians experience the armor.<sup>45</sup> Paul’s prayer request in Ephesians 6:19–20 is directly related to the sword of the Spirit, for he wants God to strengthen him to speak the word with boldness. The Spirit (πνεῦμα) is the link between Ephesians 6:17–18, for the Spirit enables us to rely on God through

41. Syntactically, the participle ἀναλαμβάνετε (“take up”) is subordinate to the main verb στήτε (“stand,” Eph 6:14) and thus continues to elaborate on the meaning of στήτε. Nevertheless, it syntactically is distinct from the prior post-verbal participles in Ephesians 6:14–15 in that (1) the participial phrase is asyndetic and (2) ἐν παντί is placed in “marked focus” or “prominence” due to its pre-verbal position (Runge, *Discourse Grammar*, 189–91). The emphasis is thus not on the action of “taking up” but on the necessity of taking up faith *at all times* (cf. BDAG [329] notes that ἐν can be a “marker of circumstances or condition under which something takes place”).

42. Probably the salvation Paul has in mind is future: (1) the immediate context is prospective and eschatological (e.g., “the evil day,” 6:13); (2) elsewhere in Ephesians Paul’s inaugurated eschatology does not nullify future fulfillment (cf. 1:13–14; 4:30); and (3) the close parallel in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 views the helmet as the *hope* of salvation (contra Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 450).

43. So Thielman, *Ephesians*, 416.

44. The phrase τοῦ πνεύματος (“of the Spirit”) is likely a genitive of possession.

45. Syntactically, the participle προσευχόμενοι (“praying”) is subordinate to δέξασθε (“take,” Eph 6:17)—not στήτε (“stand,” Eph 6:14; contra Best, *Ephesians*, 604)—and probably expresses the means by which we receive the sword the Spirit wields (rightly Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 854; contra Thielman, *Ephesians*, 432–33). Also, Constantine R. Campbell (*Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008], 72) avers that present participles are typically contemporaneous with the action of the main verb, suggesting προσευχόμενοι is contemporaneous with reception of the armor. Snodgrass (*Ephesians*, 344) suggests it typifies the “demeanor” of Christians.

prayer to speak the gospel boldly (6:18), and then uses as his sword our bold sharing of the gospel to free those controlled by the “powers” (6:17).<sup>46</sup>

Hence, Paul’s strategy to stand against the “powers” is that Christians should rest in and appropriate by faith the redemptive work of Christ on their behalf. Like Israel in the OT, they were weak and sinful, and yet by God’s grace in Christ they had already experienced a new exodus, a new redemption (Eph 1:7). By his grace they already were saved through faith and had been brought near to God by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:4–22). Their Divine Warrior had already fought for them, and the “powers” were already decisively defeated (Eph 1:20–23; 4:8–10). They were already therefore free from the darkness of the “powers” and had been brought into the light (Eph 5:8). Even though the “powers” still held sway over non-Christians, and believers needed to remain vigilant (Eph 4:27), Christ’s decisive triumph over the “powers” undergirded the Christian’s new status in God’s presence and new way of life (Eph 2:19–22; 5:9–14). Therefore, Paul’s battle strategy for Christians to stand against the schemes of the devil is that they should remember the gospel of Christ (Eph 2:11), trusting in the sufficiency of his death, resurrection, and ascension for them. Instead of trusting in themselves, they should remember that it is only by virtue of their union with Christ, their Divine Warrior, that they have been freed from the “powers” and will continue to stand firm against them.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that in Ephesians 6:10–20 Paul teaches that the “powers” are evil, supernaturally powerful, spiritual beings, and that because of their existence and hostility towards the church, Christians must stand firm against them in the strength the Lord provides in the gospel. Far from dismissing them, Paul reminds Christians of their dark reality and dominion over those who belong to the present evil age. Christians must take seriously the existence and hostility of these beings, lest they succumb to the onslaught of temptations and trials associated with the “powers.”

Moreover, in Ephesians 6:10–20 Paul’s prescription for standing firm against the “powers” centers around the gospel of Christ. Specifically, Paul emphasizes the Christian’s union with Christ in order to stand firm. Utilizing allusions to the exodus and OT Divine Warrior texts, Paul teaches that, just as Israel, though weak and sinful, benefited from God’s redemptive work by trusting in him to fight their battles, so Christians benefit from God’s redemptive work in Christ by trusting in his all-sufficient victory and ascendancy over the “powers.” On the basis of Christ’s defeat and subjugation of the “powers,” Christians should live by faith, resting in

46. Regarding prayer *ἐν πνεύματι* (“in the Spirit,” 6:18), BDAG (327) notes that the preposition *ἐν* in this construction can “designate a close personal relation in which the referent of the *ἐν*-term is viewed as the controlling influence.” Thus, the Spirit controls or propels us to pray.

and appropriating afresh the gospel of Christ so that they will be able to stand firm against the “powers.”

Paul’s command to be strong in the Lord does not entail Christian passivity or laziness. It is certainly not an invitation to antinomianism or loose morals. Rather, the call to put on, take up, and receive the armor commends vigilance throughout the Christian life. The call to put on “readiness” (Eph 6:15) accompanied by unceasing prayer (Eph 6:18) is a far cry from passivity, as is the command to receive the sword of Spirit, which does not nullify but propels speaking the gospel with boldness (Eph 6:17–20). Still, that the command to stand firm centers around the gospel of Christ means that Christians cannot boast in themselves, as though the armor or the victory they enjoy come from themselves. Like their salvation, which being rooted in God’s grace disallows all human boasting before God (Eph 2:8–9), the entirety of their Christian life is a testament to God’s grace. Everything good the Christian enjoys, including the strength to stand firm against the “powers,” owes to God’s redemptive work in Christ on their behalf, from which they benefit through union with Christ by faith.