

Our three lessons from scripture have a common theme today. That theme is standing firm.

Standing firm is often not a very exciting concept in our culture. It seems rather static, rather mediocre. If you're standing firm you're not going anywhere. And we like to go. We like to gain. We like to advance, to enlarge our territory, to increase our market share. We want to drive down the field and score those touchdowns. And at times, that's appropriate.

But at other times, standing firm becomes absolutely essential. Football games are not just won by the offense scoring points. They're also won by the defense stopping the other team's offense. Or think of a marriage. There are times when spouses need to grow in love with each other. But there are other important times when just hanging in there and sticking it out is what is required for the marriage to survive. Or think of a teenager dealing with peer pressure. Standing firm may be the very best thing to do.

Our three lessons are all about standing firm. A brief mention of our OT and Gospel lessons. Then a little deeper look at the Epistle.

In our lesson from 1 Kings, we hear Solomon talking a good game. Solomon stands before God and promises to follow him. Solomon promises to walk before God with all of his heart, with steadfast love. Last week Solomon promised something similar.

And yet, Solomon eventually falls away from God. Solomon begins well. He is faithful to God. He builds God a grand and glorious Temple. But later in his reign he begins worshipping other gods, and building innumerable temples for other gods as well. Solomon does not stand firm. He goes from faithful to faithless.

As a priest, that's one of the saddest things I sometimes witness, seeing someone go from faith to faithlessness. Sometimes people go from one church to another, and that's fine. But to see someone walking away from the faith completely is absolutely tragic.

And yet, that's what happens with Solomon. He is the prime example of not standing firm with God.

In our Gospel lesson from John 6 we see a slightly different example. Jesus has been teaching about being the Bread of Life, about the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. This teaching is too tough for a lot of people. And so in today's Gospel v66, John tells us that many of his followers, many of his outer circle of disciples “turned back and no longer went about with him.” After that, Jesus asks his inner circle, the twelve disciples, “Do you also wish to go away?” And Peter answers for the group, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

This has always struck me as kind of a mixed answer. It's a way of saying, “Yes, we probably would like to go away. But we're not going to, because we know that you're something special. We'd like to turn our backs on this whole thing, but we can't, because you're too important, and we know it.”

To me this is standing firm by default. It’s doing the right thing because you know it’s the right thing, even if your heart’s not in it. It’s sticking it out because you know you should stick it out even though you really aren’t thrilled about sticking it out.

This is a great step above Solomon. Solomon didn’t stick it out. He turned his back on God. The disciples at least promise to hang in there, and they do a pretty decent job of it until Jesus gets arrested, but that’s another story. For now, they are standing firm, maybe not joyfully, but with their actions at least.

Solomon is a negative example. The 12 are a rather mixed example. But there is a positive example. There is the intentional decision to stand firm.

When I think of this kind of positive, intentional standing firm, I think of the 1964 movie, *Zulu*.

The movie is set during the British-Zulu war of 1879. Earlier in the morning, the Zulu warriors had annihilated a force of 1,400 British soldiers, one of the worst defeats in the history of the British Army. And then the Zulu warriors move to attack a tiny mission station and hospital at Rorke’s Drift. The commander of the tiny outpost has only 139 soldiers to stand against 4,000 Zulu warriors. During the afternoon, and into the night the Zulus attack in wave after wave. Early the next morning, the Zulus prepare to attack again.

In the scene, the Welsh and English soldiers are standing at their makeshift barricades, waiting for yet another Zulu attack. The Zulus are singing their war songs, chanting the Zulu word for “Kill.” They’re trying to psyche themselves up and psyche out the British. Yet, as the Redcoats are listening to the intimidating sound, they begin singing as well. They sing an old Welsh song about standing firm:

"Keep these burning words before ye,
Welshman will not yield."

The British stand firm, and they survive the attack. What allows 139 British soldiers to survive against overwhelming odds? Partly it’s their equipment and training. But mostly it is their spirit. They stand together. They encourage each other. They stand firm, singing in the face of their enemy.

We hear the call to stand firm in our Epistle lesson from Ephesians, ch6. Paul encourages us to stand firm in our faith, and he reminds us what it takes to do so. It takes the right equipment. But it also takes the support of fellow Christians.

Paul uses military imagery. v11 “Put on the whole armor of God.” Let God strengthen you. How? By putting on the armor he provides.

Why is God arming you? The answer is in the middle of verse 11: ‘so that you may be able to stand against the wiles, the trickiness of the Devil.’

Notice that he does say, “stand.” He doesn’t tell us we can defeat evil. That’s God’s job. Instead, God gives us his protection just so we can stand firm and hold our ground while we’re under attack.

And then in verses 14 through 17, Paul goes into detail describing the armor God gives us. And when he says armor, he means Roman soldier armor. Think *Gladiator*, not *Camelot*.

First is the belt in verse 14. Belts were vitally important in Paul’s time. Since everyone wore loose flowing robes, they would often get tangled up, they would often get in the way. Whenever anyone wanted to travel or work or fight, they would have to gird up their loins. They would have to pull their robes up and belt them into place so that they wouldn’t get in the way.

For Christians, truth is our belt. There are a lot of competing ideas and philosophies in the world, especially in a pluralistic age like this one. Many people walk around guessing and groping, and sometimes getting all tangled up. But if we as Christians surround ourselves with God’s truth, then we’re ready for action. God’s truth gives us a sense of direction and purpose.

Next in verse 14 is the breastplate, one of the strongest and most important pieces of armor. The breastplate protects the vital centers of the body from injury.

The breastplate for us is righteousness. Righteousness, in the Biblical sense, is a legal term. It has to do with innocence, it has to do with being free from wrongdoing. How do you protect your heart? By doing the right thing. Because when we do wrong, things can escalate and get out of hand very quickly. By doing what is right, and by keeping ourselves free from doing wrong, we will protect ourselves from the Evil One.

Next in verse 15 are shoes. One of the secret weapons of the Roman army was their boots, which allowed them to march long distances, and also gave them traction in battle that their enemies didn’t have. Without shoes, it’s hard to travel, fight, or do anything else. Our feet will become quickly bruised and cut. But with shoes, we’re ready for action.

The shoes that equip us are the Gospel of Peace, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Gospel propels us forward and guides our steps. But the Gospel is also a firm surface we can stand on and rely upon.

Next is the shield in verse 16. There were different kinds of shields in Paul’s day. Paul specifically is talking about the large shield used by heavy infantry. It’s a big oblong shield that protects the whole body. These shields were designed, in particular, to protect against arrows and flaming arrows. They had an outer covering of leather that the soldiers would soak in water before a battle. If a flaming arrow struck this particular kind of shield, it would either bounce off, or it would burn itself out without setting the shield on fire.

In the same way, Paul says, it is our faith that provides us with protection against the flaming darts and arrows sent by the Evil One. It is our faith that stands between us and the

forces of darkness. Our faith, our trust in Christ protects us from the arrows of temptation. We may feel the impact of burning arrows hitting us. We may see the smoke and get nervous. But our continued trust, our continued faith in Jesus Christ will allow them to burn themselves out without damaging us.

Then in verse 17 is the helmet which crowns us, which protects our heads. The helmet was the very strongest single piece of armor a Roman soldier had. Our helmet is our salvation. God’s mighty act of saving and redeeming us through our Lord Jesus Christ is the crowning triumph and strongest protection for any Christian.

Also in verse 17, we are given a sword. The sword is a weapon of both attack and defense against the forces of sin. Our sword is the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Word of God. This is so important for Christians. We need to spend time reading God’s word, preferably every day. We need to let scripture penetrate our hearts.

Lastly, in verse 18, Paul exhorts us to pray constantly. Not just occasionally, but at all times and in all places. Paul tells us that we are to remain alert and persevere in our prayers for the saints, in other words for each other. By praying for each other we help one another stand firm.

The fight is tough. The enemy is strong. But God is on our side. And God has given us wonderful gifts: truth, righteousness, the Good News, salvation, faith, scripture, and prayer. By ourselves were in trouble. With God on our side, and by supporting each other, we can stand firm.

It's tough out there in the world. You’d better not go out there alone. And you’d better not go out unequipped.

Take your comrades in arms. And take along God’s armor, sword and shield. That way, you’ll be equipped to stand firm, no matter what. And always pray for your fellow Christians, so that they can stand firm, too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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