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Standing firm.....

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."

Ephesians 6:13

You most likely have heard or read about the devastation of Pompei. The killer lava flow from the volcano Vesuvius buried that flourishing roman town in 79 AD. The two hundred feet thick hot flowing lava burned and buried all living creatures. People and animals were in a chaotic frenzy as they tried to escape the threatening terror. There was only one person who remained standing guard at the gate of Pompei: A ROMAN SOLDIER. He had no way to fight the impending doom. He was falling victim of the suffocating sulfurous gases, the burning rain of volcanic ash, the rolling lava flow, yet he stood firm. They found his crumbling bones, his rusty weapons right there at the gate of Pompei when the site was excavated in the 1700s. Since that time the Roman soldier had been the symbol of heroic determination in standing one's ground.

The Apostle Paul may have observed fully armed and armored Roman soldiers on guard, and that sight may have impressed him. It's likely that in his letter to Ephesians he modeled the descriptions of God's armaments after the armaments of a Roman soldier. As he writes: "Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace..... take the shield of faith,the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." His urging means: take up these weapons and look after them so that they remain shiny and clean, that they remain spotless. Consider the Roman soldier! His armament wasn't a tool of salvation, but merely an equipment for fighting. Nonetheless, it demanded his respect, trust, and unselfish dedication. The weapon of the Roman soldier was spotless. The

Roman soldier wouldn't hide like a coward, wouldn't run away, wouldn't commit treason, wouldn't be disloyal, rather he would perish at his guard post.

Let us learn from him the meaning of: STANDING FIRM WITH LOYALTY.

Standing firm with loyalty doesn't mean staring into nothingness, idleness with folded arms, or pretended calm, or awaiting for miracles. It doesn't mean the paralysis of the will when we freeze up and unable to act. It doesn't mean the dejection once we see the inevitable end. While all those thoughts may cross our minds, standing firm with loyalty means brave, determined, heroic way of standing our ground.

Let's suppose that a beloved member of our family is suffering from a serious illness, and while we are willing to make sacrifices for this family member, in reality there is little hope for recovery. As we are standing at the foot of the bed, the idea of losing our loved one strikes fear in our hearts. We would like to escape from this ordeal, and with our fingers clutched we cry out to the heavens with our grievance. Yet, the only solution that preserves our sanity and gives us solace is to HEROICALLY STAND FIRM while shedding a few tears in secret.

When the world around us lurches like an earthquake, when the people scramble in panic, or shake their fists as they cry out to the sky, the only brave action then is to calmly stand firm.

When a painful disappointment beats us down, when our sacred inner world is crushed, when all happiness and hope appear lost, the only source of encouragement is STANDING FIRM IN FAITH.

When raging emotions or seductive temptation besiege us and threaten to drag us down and sweep us away like a house in stormy flood waters, it is imperative to STAND FIRM.

When storms tear into us, lightning twists in the sky, when cannons thunder, when murderous bombs explode, and man, like a leaf in a whirlwind, tumbles at the edge of a bomb crater, there is one heroic action: UNWAVERINGLY STANDING FIRM. Standing your ground with unfaltering faith, without wavering, like a Roman soldier, equipped with the armaments of God: “Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace..... take the shield of faith,the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Acts of heroism always captivate the world, especially our youth, who is saturated with hero worship, and the respect for heroes. However, through the eye of a mature adult standing firm is something more, something larger, something tougher than being heroic. From battle-hardened soldiers we hear that on the battlefield a charge is not the most difficult task, but, rather, holding your position under enemy fire, or during a precarious night time, or the wait for the battle field medics on a frozen field, nursing ones bleeding wound. To stand our ground we need, metaphorically speaking, "the whole armor of God." We need our entire heart, our entire soul, and all our physical strength. Terrifying stories of sinking or shipwrecked ships, tragedies of collapsed mine shafts, the heart wrenching mass migration of entire nations bring us examples of standing one's ground. Let us now picture that sinking ship, turned on its side, with time running out, the captain and the crew standing firm and risking their lives may save all passengers. In contrast, if the captain and crew panics, chaos would ensue and the passengers would likely perish. Let us then picture that collapsed mine where, after the explosion of methane gas, the shafts are smashed, and the rubble buries alive the miners. Only the miners' composure and heroic perseverance can sustain them until the rescuers break through the wall of that dark casket, and snatch them out of the jaws of death. Our last example is from the time between the First and Second World Wars when residents of Transylvania were fleeing sometimes like a trickle, and sometimes like a flood. Tears flowed like rivers, and clouds of sorrow hovered over the country. But then we saw those vigilant, prophetic souls who started the fires on top of the alarm poles, and like a caved in tunnel or a collapsed bridge, or a flaming sword, held back the masses intending to emigrate. Their command was: STAND FIRM HERE ON THE FAMILY NEST. Their rallying cry was: You can leave Transylvania only by stepping over our dead bodies. And the torrent of emigrating masses turned back.

To stand firm is a truly difficult task for our own lives. Difficult, but yet satisfying. While it may be a heavy cross, it brings uplifting gifts and blessings, and once we receive those gifts and blessings, we gain calmness, gladness, and brightness. The soul of the man who can stand firm is calm and bright as a sunny blue sky; it is clean and quiet as a hidden mountain lake that cannot be stirred up, cannot be soiled by the gales and storms of life. The person who can stand firm has a solid, upright character, like a pine tree growing from a mountain side, a pine that doesn't easily bend like a reed, but defiant more like a century old oak tree. You can rely on the word, and the offer of a helping hand of such a person. The presence of such a person is like a strong castle that calms us like when a child is calmed by the father's strong embrace. Such a

person looks danger in the eye, and the pretenses of the threat will go away, and the powers of the threat will diminish like the waves of an angry ocean break apart on the rocky seashore; even the fear of death subsides then.

I read the story of a heroic soldier based on eyewitness accounts. This heroic soldier stood at the street corner with death-defying calmness, with a hand grenade in hand, waiting for the approaching enemy tanks. He stood there motionless, like a statue, and waited..... After a few minutes the first armored beast appeared. The tank spotted the soldier, and trained its machine guns at him. About 150 feet from the soldier the tank slowed, and came to a stop about 60 feet from him. In those nerve wrecking seconds the physical force and the force of the will locked eyes. At the end the tank turned, and, perhaps as a sign of respect, it rumbled away. There was, then, a victory for mankind, a victory of steady will power over brute force, and over the terror of death as well.

What a blessing, what an unrestrainable joy it is to know that our fathers, children, siblings can be like that. How incredibly satisfying it is to know that we can find such people, whether heroes in war or in peace, in our families, in our homes, in our homeland, and in our churches. The mere perseverance of them gives us a feeling of security, steadiness, and peacefulness.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters! We readily and gladly dip our flag of recognition to those who searched restlessly, who blazed new paths, who established our homeland. However, our highest respect goes to those who STOOD FIRM in good times and in bad, whether it rained or shined, or stuck in the pounding surf. They wrote the thousand-year history of the Hungarian nation. They wrote the history of our little church. The light of "standing firm" is shining through the life of our founder bishop, Ferenc David. He was active in blazing new paths, as he declared at Torda the Edict of Religious Freedom, a first in the world. He was active in persuading other souls, as the entire population of Kolozsvár converted to be Unitarians, and Hungarians as well, when he preached from that round stone. Yet, he reached his greatest achievement when he STOOD FIRM in his faith, even though that cost his life.

My Brothers and Sisters! To achieve progress for all mankind, to fight for a happier life, to attain the ideals taught by Jesus, we need people who can stand firm. There have been many among us whose lives have been turned upside down or outright crushed, and whose hearts have been broken. There have been many among us who have been awaiting happier, nicer days. There are many golden wheat grains awaiting that we plant them into fertile ground; there are many flickering oil lamps awaiting that we

nurture them into robust flames. It is our heavenly and sacred calling to protect them to our last drop of blood. Let us, then, come to the fore, and take up the whole armor of God, and do everything to STAND FIRM.

The Roman soldier stood firm. He had a strong will. He belonged to the classic school of thought called stoicism. That school of thought promoted the development of deep, brave self-confidence, the heroic way of standing your ground. That school adhered to the tenet of fulfilling one's commitment despite all dangers. That school placed its faith into granite-like masculinity. While such a frame of mind commands our respect, it is a rigid one, and by itself not quite sufficient, as it relies solely on human powers.

The Apostle Paul points beyond that and beckons us to take up all armament of God. Strong-willed individuals may stand their ground, but people of lesser will power, the weaker or smaller people may not be able to stand their ground solely on their own. They need all armaments of God. And those armaments of God: righteousness, peace-making, faith, the word of God are available to all of us. We, the small, the weak may become strong, as we become strong through God, and with God. That is the armament that made saints, heroes, martyrs out of ordinary people. When we have to stand firm, we don't just count on our own trembling hand, but we also seek the protecting hand of God, like a trembling child seeks the strong hand of his Father.

If we are serving a righteous, uplifting cause, we must comprehend that such cause is not only ours, but the cause of God as well, and he will be victorious in that cause. With God on our side our victory is ensured. When we carry a cross, He helps carrying it, as it is God's plan to lighten the weight of our cross.

When great peril approaches us or when the threat of death hangs over our heads, we ought not be afraid, as He leads us from death to a better life. When we have confidence in ourselves and faith in God, we will never falter.

Let us, then, come to the fore, and take up all armaments of God, and having done everything we can stand firm, now and forever. Amen