

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Christian Life - The Christian Warfare

A few months ago, a friend of mine was attending a training course. At the end of the course, he gave a lady a lift to the railway station and during the journey he discovered she was a Christian. She had been a Christian a few years and asked my friend how long it was since his conversion. He told her he had been a Christian for over forty years. Then she asked him, "Does it get any easier?" "No," replied my friend, "we are in a battle!"

How do you feel? Do think the Christian life is a battle? Well, if you do, you are in good company. Paul thought the same. As he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, the Roman soldiers who guarded him were a constant reminder of the conflict he was in as he communicated the Gospel. In Ephesians 6 he seems to have used his Roman guards as an illustration of how we need to be equipped to fight in the spiritual conflict he describes.

He starts his discourse on the armour of God in Ephesians 6:10, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."

A strong army needs strong generals. A great army needs a great leader. Paul was always anxious to bring Christ before the hearts of His people. He remembered meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. And he never forgot that the resurrected Christ was the source of his strength. No wonder then that he starts this remarkable passage on the Christian's warfare in this way. We are often tempted to concentrate on the armour Paul describes and to forget the Person who calls us to wear it.

Every battle has a cause. Throughout the course of history, millions of people have sacrificed their lives following the ideals and ambitions of great leaders. Paul describes our leader in the simplest and most powerful way – Lord! In doing so he first emphasises the Person of Christ – "the Lord". Then he emphasises the Power of Christ – "the power of His might." He stirs in our hearts the knowledge of the greatness of the Person we serve and reminds us that He is the source of all our power and strength. In John 15:4, Jesus says, "Abide in Me" and then in verse 5, "without Me you can do nothing". Peter was trusting in his own strength when he followed Christ into the judgement hall believing he could go with Jesus into death itself. When that trust was tested Peter discovered the bitterness of self confidence when he denied Jesus three times. Later, forgiven and restored, he found that the true source of strength was trusting in and following Jesus.

Paul's words, "Be strong" are used in the present tense and point not to the need to find new strength but to use the strength we have through our union with Christ through the Spirit of God.

After focussing our hearts and minds on Christ, Paul introduces the armour of God in verse 11. "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." The original text reads, "Put on God's panoply". The word 'panoply' expresses several things: a wide-ranging and impressive array or display, a complete suit of armour, a protective covering, and full ceremonial dress and equipment. The armour is not only effective but also dignified. It is needed to face the wiles of the devil but it also bears witness to the character of God himself. The armour provides everything that is needed for the spiritual battle in which we find ourselves and Paul encourages us to put on the whole armour of God. Although it is described piece by piece, it is a complete set. You cannot pick and chose what you want to wear – we are meant to put all of it on!

Paul presented Christ as our all-powerful leader. Now he identifies our enemy the devil. All of the New Testament writers are very direct when describing the devil. In the Gospels, Christ confronts and defeats him. In the book of Acts, the apostles confront and defeat him. All the other references to him in the rest of the New Testament describe how dangerous and powerful he is; how we can overcome him and thwart his purposes; and how he will ultimately be completely vanquished by Christ Himself.

The armour of God is needed to stand against "the wiles" of the devil. This describes the methods and strategies (note the military terms) Satan uses in his campaign against men, described by Peter as a "war against the soul" in 1 Peter 2:11. We have examples of the subtle and deceptive ways in which Satan works throughout the Bible. The first and very important example we have is in the Garden of Eden when he deceives Eve. In the beginning of the Gospels, we see Satan trying the same tactics against the Lord Jesus in the wilderness. In both cases Satan distorts the word of

God. In the first case, Eve is led into sin at the beginning of the history of mankind. In the second case Christ defeats Satan at the outset of His public ministry – a victory which foreshadows Satan's later complete destruction. As Hebrews 2:14 puts it, Jesus became a man and went to the cross, "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil."

Against this background, Paul describes the battle we are involved in, in verse 12, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Note it is "we", that is, Christians whom Paul has in mind at the beginning of this verse. Paul is describing the Christian life as a life of conflict. Not a physical but a spiritual struggle. The enemies we encounter are evil spiritual forces. The battle is about hearts and minds. It is about good and evil. The expressions "rulers of darkness" and "spiritual hosts of wickedness" describe the diabolic spiritual forces at work to influence and enslave the hearts and minds of men in opposition to themselves and to God. This may seem to some to be both medieval and melodramatic but history has demonstrated that evil forces, in all kinds of guises, have caused untold suffering in our world. Often this suffering has been the result of conflicting religious views.

Paul was conscious of dark forces at work. His own ministry had led to the conversion of many people involved in occult practices in the city of Ephesus. This had caused concern amongst the craftsmen who made silver statuettes of the goddess Diana and demonstrated the complex relationship between idolatry and commercialism. Interestingly, in Acts 19:37 the Town Clerk of Ephesus explains to the crowd that Paul and his friends were "neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess (Diana)." This very powerful testimony demonstrates that the Gospel was preached and the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts and lives of those who had trusted Christ so that many people turned from idols "to serve the Living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

In verse 13, Paul repeats the necessity of the armour of God. "Therefore take up the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." It seems Paul is describing the Christian's position as a defender resisting assault rather than an attacking advance. In other parts of Scripture, we are told that the gates of Hades are unable to resist the power of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, Paul writes about "pulling down strongholds". But here, it appears, Paul is emphasising defence. It could be argued that we are in this position in Britain today as Christianity is often derided in the media and society regularly referred to as being post-Christian.

The need to stand is further emphasised in verse 14, "Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness."

The picture Paul paints would have been familiar to readers of the Old Testament. Isaiah writes, "Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins and faithfulness the belt of His waist" (Isaiah 11:5) and "For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head" (Isaiah 59:17). These verses refer to the Messiah and are applied by Paul to those who are now "in Christ". This is important because it conveys the thought that Christ's strength is imparted to His people.

The idea of the belt of truth suggests what is at the foundation of the armour. Jesus describes Himself as "the truth" in John 14:6. In John 17:17, Jesus prays to the Father, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." The items of armour begin with the "belt of truth" and end with the "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Truth encircles the whole concept of the armour of God. The belt of truth indicates not simply knowing the truth but living by it and being prepared, in the words of 2 Timothy 2:21, "for every good work".

The breastplate was the piece of armour that protected the vital organs. As Christians, we are covered by the righteousness of Christ. This is beautifully illustrated by the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. There, you will remember, the father commands his servants to put the best robe on his repentant son. God has, through Christ, made us righteous. We are reminded of that wonderful provision in the breastplate but here the apostle is particularly thinking of the practical righteousness of the people of God. It is the Christian's responsibility to live a righteous life consistent with being a child of God. Self-righteousness is when we trust in our own goodness. A righteous life is lived in humility and with an ardent desire to avoid evil and to do good. We should not allow the clichéd accusations of being "do-gooders" to prevent us from following the Saviour who went about "doing good". Society bears the financial and, more importantly, the human costs inflicted by rejecting moral behaviour. Christians are commanded to "be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ...loved us."

It is interesting that in describing the armour of God in relation to conflict, Paul introduces the Gospel of peace in verse 15, "And having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Again there is a link to Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountains, are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things!" (Isaiah 52:7). Paul quotes this verse in relation to the preaching of the Gospel in Romans 10:15.

I am sure communicating the Gospel is implied in the verse. The apostles turned the world upside down by preaching this same Gospel of peace. Theirs was not a war with swords but by the word of God and the Spirit of God. "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6). The Gospel turned bitter and cruel men into gentle and loving men. In place of shame and sorrow, this Gospel gave dignity and joy. In man's hands, the things of God are often distorted and weakened. That is why it is so important to return to the powerful simplicity of Christ and His apostles. But as well as communicating the Gospel of peace, I think verse 15 implies the effect the Gospel has in the hearts and minds of those who have believed it. We are followers of the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6), who has given us peace with God (Romans 5:1). He has also given us the peace of God which surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7). And we have a Father who is the God of peace (Philippians 4:9). In a world increasingly bereft of peace, do we demonstrate the peace of God? Or are we also engulfed by uncertainty and fear? Jesus wants us to know peace that has its source in Him and of which circumstances could not rob us. "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

In verse 16 Paul turns to faith: "Above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one." Of the two shields used in warfare, this verse refers to the larger, heavier one. The large Roman shield was designed to protect the whole body. It was made of wood covered in leather and edged with metal. It was soaked in water before battle to help quench the flaming arrows of the armies the Roman legions faced. It not only protected the individual soldier but was also joined together by columns of soldiers to protect the whole group from attacks from the front, from their flanks and from above. These groups of soldiers have been described as human tanks and were one of the most effective tactics used by the Romans in the field of battle.

Paul uses this shield to illustrate how faith provides the fullest protection from the fiercest attacks of Satan. Notice here Satan is not described as a deceiver or an angel of light but more in his real character as a roaring lion.

We still need faith today - a simple trust in our God expressed in our daily lives. Do we think of entering a day without first committing all that lies before us to our heavenly Father? Do we also sense the need to link our faith together with other believers to defend each other from the onslaughts we often encounter as individuals and as the people of God? John Calvin wrote, "Our faith is really and truly tested only when we are brought into very severe conflicts, and when even hell itself seems opened to swallow us up."

In verse 17, Paul describes the helmet and the sword, "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The helmet protected the head but also dignified the soldier. It identified him. Even today the Roman helmet is an unmistakable and immediate reminder of the Roman Empire and the conquests by its armies. When the soldier put on his helmet, it identified him with all the greatness of the Empire that he belonged to and that he was called to serve. In Ephesians 4, Paul beseeches his readers to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called." Our salvation imparts wonderful blessings and also empowers us to communicate and defend our faith.

It is interesting that the helmet is the last piece of armour to be put on. It completes the equipment that was worn in contrast to the shield and the sword that were held. Our salvation, which the helmet is linked to, is a complete salvation. It has three aspects. It saves us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin and the presence of sin. It has dealt with our past, it empowers us for the present and it assures us of the future. It has its source in the Godhead: the Father who spared not His Son, the Son who gave Himself and the Spirit who imparts life. This salvation imparts both protection and dignity. The Gospel has taken us out of darkness into light and out of spiritual death into life. Paul describes God's great salvation in his letter to the Romans. And, in 1:16, he writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." Paul had an enormous sense of the power and dignity of salvation. He had witnessed its transforming power over and over again. Now he visualises salvation as a helmet protecting and dignifying the wearer.

No matter how much armour a soldier has he will not be effective without a weapon. Paul describes the Christian's weapon as "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." In Hebrews 4:12 we read, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." In Revelation 1:16, Christ is described as having "in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword."

These passages emphasise how the living and powerful word of God is used by the Spirit of God to penetrate the heart, mind and conscience. The word of God has the power both to convict and convert the hardest individual and transform him or her into a child of God. Also Christ Himself is the fulfilment of the promises and purposes of God outlined in His word. In John 1 Christ is presented as the "Word".

And for Christians, the word of God brings Christ to our hearts. It feeds, it comforts, it encourages, it directs, it challenges and changes us. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is

profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete." The word of God equips us to live in a world that can be hostile to Christ and to bear witness to the power of the salvation we enjoy. Peter writes, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). In Jude 3 we read, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

The spiritual conflict outlined by Paul in this remarkable passage underlines the necessity of reading, believing, obeying and understanding the word of God. We should take every opportunity to communicate and defend our faith. There will be times when people listen to us and times when we think our witness has little or no effect. But let us always remember God's word and His certain promise, "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

The word of God reveals the character, love and grace of God. At the same time it addresses every detail of our lives. Throughout history when men have believed and obeyed it, great things have been accomplished. Such a man was Martin Luther who wrote, "I have made a covenant with God that He sends me neither visions, dreams, nor even angels. I am well satisfied with the gift of the Holy Scriptures, which give me abundant instruction and all that I need to know both for this life and for that which is to come."

What a difference it would make if we all thought like Martin Luther!

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