

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Ephesians 6:10-24 The Church at War

War has been waged for almost as long as man has been on this planet. While some wars have been fought for purely materialistic reasons, many arise because of a clash of ideologies, where each side is prepared to fight to preserve or promote their way of life which they see as the best.

It has been 60 years since Britain was engaged in a total war, where all the resources of the nation were employed to defeat the evil of the Nazi threat. But during those decades, we have frequently been engaged in wars of more limited scope.

For the last few years, we have been engaged in a new type of war, the “war on terror”. Thanks to 9-11, the USA is constantly looking for enemies to attack and subjugate as the best way of defence. The same agenda is in place here in the UK, where this very week we have had a pre-emptive raid on a suspected terrorist cell in Forest Gate, with a massive police presence to ensure there was no chance of escape for the terrorists.

Western governments are keen to protect “our way of life”. But they fail to recognise that the real threat comes from an entirely different quarter, and cannot be subdued by shock and awe or undercover operations

For there is an immanent threat to our wellbeing which will result in worse carnage and suffering than a thousand 9-11s, though as yet few have joined the battle against it. The real threat to the public is not nuclear holocaust or terrorist outrage, but failure to accept God’s salvation and thus escape God’s coming wrath on our sin. The battle rages all around us if only we could see, where we face three main weapons which keep us from God:

1. Our Sinful desires
2. False ideas and ideologies
3. Evil spirits.

Evil spirits? Isn’t that an outmoded idea from past ages where witches were burned at the stake? Well, that view is itself one of the dangerous false ideas – the idea that the material world is all there is.

Now I’m not one for seeing demons under every bed; but nevertheless we must acknowledge that spiritual forces are at work. Take the resurgence of interest in Spiritualism, where amongst the sham palm readers and fake mediums, there are those who do get messages from outside of themselves, from “the other side” as they call it. However, such activity is not from the God of the Bible, who condemns these things. A telling fact is that people who get involved with spiritualism are driven away from commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and led to believe that their sins have not put them in danger and that all will be well with their souls.

Outside of overt Spiritualism, most people will fail to see the threat that they face. In fact, one of the tragedies of our age is that deadly threats are embraced as healthy pursuits. Sinful desires become legitimate pleasures. Ideas which set themselves up against God become liberating and enlightening world views which free us from the constraints of the past. And the spiritual forces of evil become a source of entertainment in horror movies and maybe even a drunken séance.

Far from leading to freedom, all of this enslaves people. But we who have been set free by knowing the truth ought to be wise to what is going on around and even within us.

Like it or not, as a Christian in this fallen world you are in the front line of the battle. Yes you may know the peace of God in your heart, but you will not know peace in the world – unless that is you have made peace with it by accepting its ways... in which case you won't know peace with God.

Front line soldiers need to be prepared for attacks from the enemy, which is what our passage is about. Helmets and shields will not protect against the forces arrayed against us – but they do serve as a useful analogy of the defences God has given us.

Now we can get too bogged down in the details here both in terms of the armour and the enemy. We could get bogged down trying to differentiate the different kind of evil spirits Paul describes in v 12. Some go to great lengths to establish the hierarchies in the spirit world, identifying the function of each type of evil spirit. That is, in my opinion, quite foolish. We can know nothing of the operation of the spiritual dimensions unless it is revealed to us – which it is not. Not surprisingly, the Bible spends vastly more time describing what God is like than what evil spirits are – which ought to give us a clue to what we should spend our time and energy studying!

Equally, when it comes to our defences, we can read too much into things. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 Paul calls faith a breastplate and not a shield as he does here – showing that we shouldn't push the analogy too far. But it is useful to have analogies, as such illustrations can be more memorable than abstract ideas.

It is likely that Paul had a particularly good opportunity to consider the spiritual equivalents of various pieces of Roman armour, as he was most likely chained to a Roman soldier night and day. His original audience would also be all too familiar with the armour which Roman soldiers wore, as there would be Roman garrisons in or close to every significant town. The sight of soldiers in full armour would be as common place for them as it was for the people of Belfast during the troubles. Fortunately we don't often see soldiers kitted out with their full battle gear in the streets of Therfield or Royston, and even more rarely do we see someone in Roman armour, so it might help to remind ourselves what it was like.

Belt of Truth

Now the first piece Paul describes is translated as “the belt” of truth. We think of belts as something which keeps your trousers up, but the Romans didn't wear trousers! Other translations talk of having your “loins girded with truth”, which is a more accurate if archaic translation. Perhaps we should call it the “girdle of truth”!

Rather than keeping trousers from falling down, this would keep the flowing skirt-like garments in their place so that the soldier could fight without getting, as it were, his knickers in a twist!

The picture shows a Roman “cingulum”, which may be what is meant here. It basically served two functions – firstly to carry the sword, and secondly to protect the loins. It was the first piece of “armour” that the soldier would put on, and in a sense is the foundation for the rest – both in terms of protecting the body, and of enabling the soldier to fight.

When someone tells the truth, then no matter how it is prodded and poked the story does not change, no matter what new evidence comes to light, the claim remains credible and... true. In contrast, when someone tells a lie, and is questioned further, inconsistencies arise and as they elaborate on the original lie, it can become difficult to pin down exactly what is being claimed. “What a tangled web we weave...” And of course as time goes on new evidence can cast doubt on that lie, until eventually it has to be seen for what it is. I’m sure we have all been in a position where an explanation we have been given didn’t quite ring true, and later when we discover the truth everything fits into place.

Telling the truth is fundamental to good relationships. If a friend habitually lies to you, then you never know where you are with them, and even if you continue in friendship you will always be wary of what he says and are unlikely to put your full confidence in them. In the workplace, truth can often be sacrificed by people in an attempt either to promote themselves in the organisation, or to make the company appear better than it is. In some cases it becomes the expected and accepted thing. And yet even then it is a foolish practice, which rarely if ever leads to long-term success.

As we often say, the first claim of the Bible is that it is True – not just true for those who believe it, but absolutely true in its worldview, whether you choose to believe it or not.

Paul’s challenge to us here is not primarily to accept the truth of the Bible – which is taken as read – but rather to live our lives in truth, consistently with what the Bible teaches, and most importantly consistently with the character of God. If, as some do, we habitually embellish the truth or even bend it to make us look or feel better, then our fight will be hampered and we will be much less likely to stand firm in battle. And any use we try to make of the Sword of the Spirit, God’s word, will be compromised because other people will judge those claims by our lives, and find them wanting too.

Breastplate of Righteousness

Next, we come to the Breastplate of Righteousness. Now the function of the breastplate was pretty obvious – to protect the upper body from being injured by arrows or spears that the enemy might throw. It is purely defensive in nature, and although it may seem to constrain our movement or be uncomfortable to wear, it is worth the inconvenience because of the protection it gives.

Even today, our soldiers and police use the same principal to provide them with protection either in a planned battle or against unexpected attacks. The armour itself has become somewhat more advanced than the simple steel plates the Romans used, but the idea is the same. We often hear of policemen whose lives are saved because they were wearing a protective vest when they were stabbed or shot; had they not bothered to put on the “cumbersome” armour, then they would not have lived to regret it!

So, in what way does Righteousness fulfil this function in our spiritual battle? Well, for one thing, if we look at it from the wrong perspective we could see Righteousness as a hindrance to our freedom. Wouldn't it be better to be able to engage in whatever activity we want to, without having some branded as “right” and some as “wrong”? That is very much the argument of today's generation; but while it might seem to offer happiness in the short term, it leads to mortal wounds in spiritual life.

Now on the one hand we know that “our righteousness is as filthy rags” – that is, that none of us can live perfect lives before God, and so relying on our own goodness to protect us is like trusting in a torn T-shirt to stop a knife attack! So when we put on the breastplate of righteousness, it is not our goodness but Christ's that we are putting our faith in. But there is another side to this too. If we live our daily lives with no thought to what is right and wrong, then we are weakening our defences and are much more vulnerable to any attacks.

Remember that the whole point of life is to enjoy a relationship with God; and the whole point of the battle the evil one has with us is to spoil that relationship. So it follows that if we are ill-disciplined in our lives and follow the crowds in their unrighteous behaviour, then our relationship with God will go downhill!

If we are serious about our faith, we will look to put it into practice in the way we live – while trusting in Christ to make that happen, of course.

Sandals of Gospel

Next we come to footwear, which is an interesting analogy - particularly in relation to the constant injunction in the passage to “stand firm”. At first sight, we might think that this readiness that comes from the Gospel of Peace is a readiness to move forwards.

Apparently another slant on the Greek word used here is of a prepared foundation, which does fit the context better.

In any hand-to-hand combat such as a Roman soldier might engage in, a secure foothold would be vital – slip over and your opponent could move in for the kill. So it would be important for them to have good footwear, that wouldn't slip off their feet or allow them to trip or slip easily. Their shoes were open-toed sandals (designed for those warmer and drier climates!), which laced up past the ankles to give a secure fit, and had spikes on the bottom to give a good grip much like football boots do.

Today's soldiers face the same challenge, and recognise the importance of good footwear. Apparently, the standard issue army boots are not considered good enough by most soldiers, who prefer to pay their own money to get a better pair – such is the importance of the foundation that their boots provide!

In what sense does the Gospel of Peace provide this foundation for us? Well, because the Gospel message is such good news for us, it ought to provide the inspiration and motivation we need to stand firm in the battle. If we had a lesser story to tell, if the Christian message was less certain or more wishy-washy, then we might waver in our belief when under pressure.

Also, the Gospel story is one of completed work, as we considered this morning in our studies in Hebrews. Jesus Christ has done it all for us; he is our Rock, we can depend on him completely. That certainty provides a solid footing for our lives.

Shield of Faith

The major defensive item for the Roman soldier was his shield. Here we are not thinking of a small round shield that you sometimes see in films where gladiators are pitted against one-another; but the oblong, door-like shield, measuring 4' x 2', curved to provide maximum protection for the body. When joined together, these large shields formed a wall behind which a body of troops could hide themselves from the rain of the enemy's missiles. This was known as a Testudo or Tortoise, and I'm sure you seen this on Telly.

The shield was constructed of three layers of wood, and was up to 4" thick. Wood was a good material to use, in that it was plentiful and easy to work with. It did have one weakness though – it burned! One of the threats the Roman soldier faced was fire-tipped arrows. While these would not burn through a 4" wooden shield very quickly, they would certainly cause a distraction as the soldier had to put the fire out. To combat this, the shield was covered with thick leather, which would extinguish those fiery darts before they took hold.

In our spiritual battle, one of the principal ways Satan uses to attack is us to sow seeds of doubt in our minds. We see this right back in the Garden of Eden, where he says to the woman "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" and in the temptation of Christ where Satan starts "If you are the Son of God..."

Hence a strong faith is essential in combating such attacks. The more confident we are in God, the more easily we will dismiss such doubts.

I do want to emphasise something here though. There is a common misconception, which the media serve to perpetrate, that it is faith itself which helps people through hard times. We often hear people say "If only I had as strong a faith as you..." But it is not how much faith you have, but what you put it in which is the important thing!

I hate the term "faith communities", which is used to group together all the religious groupings under the common denominator of "people of faith", as though faith itself were the defining characteristic. This stems from the world-view that religion is nothing more than a psychological help for people, and so having a faith in something is merely a useful way of dealing with difficult situations. It has no external justification or meaning, but as it helps some people it is good for them.

This is not Christian faith. That is not the sort of faith which acts like a shield in the spiritual battle. An imaginary shield in an imaginary god will not prove much use against real spiritual evil.

But real faith in the real God will defend you against any onslaught.

That said, and particularly thinking of the way the world out there so often pushes out false ideas, it is important that we do what we can to keep our faith strong. That is why the basic disciplines of reading your bible, of prayer, and of fellowship with other Christians are so important. Neglect these and you will find it more difficult to deal with the doubts and lies which you come across in life.

Helmet of Salvation

Just as the breastplate protects our heart, so a helmet protects our head – and while the head is a smaller target, the consequences of a hit there are most often fatal. That is obviously because our brains are in our heads.

We have seen the importance of the truth and our acceptance of it, and the fact that the battle we fight is, in a major part, one of ideas. It follows then that our minds, our way of thinking, need to be protected in order to withstand the fight.

Salvation contributes to that in two ways. Firstly, when we are saved God begins to work in our minds to re-shape them as he intended them to be – this is not brain-washing, but is getting us to think in line with the truth, instead of with the ideas of the world we have been brought up in (see Romans 12:2).

Secondly, as Thessalonians 5:8 shows us, the *hope* we have of salvation from the very presence of sin affects the way we think and act now. Because we have our eye on a greater prize, we are willing to give up lesser things. That applies, obviously, to giving up sinful things in our lives; but also to other sacrifices we make to spend time on what is eternally important, instead of on what is merely good for a while.

That frame of mind will protect us from being pushed off course by other ideas and priorities.

Sword of the Spirit – word of God

Many people have pointed out that the sword is the only offensive weapon in this armoury. But it can also be used defensively, to deflect the enemies blows.

The Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. Words are used to convey ideas and to make and counter arguments. Ultimately, they distinguish the truth from what is false, with God's words being true by definition.

As an example of just how powerful God's words are, remember that it was by speaking "Let there be..." that things came into being in the first place. The Gospels too are full of incidents where Jesus simply speaks a word, and storms are calmed, sickness healed, and even the dead restored to life.

When Jesus was tempted, each time his response was to quote God's words from the Bible to counter the false assumptions and arguments of Satan. Knowing the Bible is vital for our Christian lives, for we cannot rely on our feelings to tell us what God wants us to do. If we want to be an effective soldier for the Lord, then we must study his word. Obviously coming to Chapel helps, but if we are serious we will also spend time reading and studying his word on our own. Then when temptation comes, we will be armed to deal with it, we will be able to stand our ground.

God's words to us are ultimately words of revelation; for it is by revelation and not discovery that we can come to know him. That is why science is not equipped to find the answer to the big questions of life, because its starting point is what *we* know, what *we* experience, and what *we* can figure out. The really big questions are patently obviously beyond us. Unless, that is, they are revealed to us by someone in a position to know.

That is exactly what God's word is – his revelation of what he is like, what he expects of us, and most importantly what he has done to win us for himself. These are the ideas that can demolish arguments and everything that sets itself up against God – not because we are super-clever or super-persuasive, but because God is! So it is that the Sword of the Spirit can be an offensive weapon too, in the sense that God's word can penetrate the hearts of those who don't yet know him, to turn them to him.

No matter what clever-sounding philosophical or scientific arguments we use in our evangelism, ultimately we have to direct people to the word of God for them to see for themselves what God has said. And the more familiar we are with it ourselves, the more likely we will be to direct them to an appropriate passage.

Pray in the Spirit

Having carefully fitted each bit of armour, and picked up shield and sword, the soldier is ready for action. So it is for us – but as our fight is not against flesh and blood, the action we take is not physical action but spiritual. And so we pray.

I don't know about you, but I am often tempted to see prayer as a bit of a waste of time – life is so busy, with so much to get on with, that stopping doing things to pray seems counterproductive. I guess that would be the case if the battle depended on my own strength and skill – but it obviously does not. I cannot control my sinful desires – if I could, I wouldn't need a saviour. Neither can I argue people into God's kingdom by the logic of my fine speeches. And of course I am unable to do battle with spirits that I cannot see, feel or touch.

No, the battle depends on God, not me. And that being the case, the only influence I can have is in prayer. Yes, I may be called upon to present an argument to someone which will help them to see the light; and I most certainly am called upon to exercise discipline over my own thoughts and desires. But no amount of my own efforts will result in a satisfactory outcome unless God is at work.

So if I am more interested in the outcome of the battle than I am in being seen to take part in it, then I had better spend more time in prayer!

Conclusion

So we have seen that we are in a war situation, with our own sinful natures, with ideas that are against God, and with spiritual forces of evil. God has provided us with the armour that we need for this battle – truth, righteousness, the Gospel message, faith, salvation and his Word – and the chief action we are to take is to pray.

Paul's desire was that he, and those he had taught, should be able to “fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel”. This is our task too. Are you ready for that fight?