

Ephesians 6:10-20 – “Stand Firm”
A Sermon by Anne Shave

Today we are reaching the end of a series on the book of Ephesians. During the past week, Hamish and I have been talking together about the final chapter of this book and our responses to it. Before leaving work on Tuesday afternoon I said to Hamish that I thought my sermon might include three “Ps” this Sunday:

- Prepare
- Persevere
- Pray

Given the situation in which we now find ourselves, these “Ps” may have a different resonance for us than I had anticipated – our most immediate concern being with responding to the coronavirus pandemic – but as well as seeming particularly apt in our current environment, these three words also sum up the ways that Paul wants his readers in Ephesus to respond to spiritual opposition. We will come to these three “Ps” a little later. First I’d like to make a few comments about the book of Ephesians as a whole, and about the spiritual opposition Paul describes.

As Hamish said at church last week, Ephesians is a book which has two halves. To put it simply, the first half is a great celebration of all that God has done through Christ, and the second half is an exhortation for the church to respond to what God has done by living in such a way that unity and love and goodness are characteristic of their community. We are to “live like people who belong to the light, for it is the light that brings a rich harvest of every kind of goodness, righteousness and truth. Try to learn what pleases the Lord.” (Eph 5:9-10) We are to be “do-gooders” in the best possible sense!

Hamish may give a wee re-cap of some of the key themes of Ephesians as he speaks to us on-line this week. What I would like to draw attention to is some of the rich metaphors and similes to describe the church and the church’s relationship with Christ that are included in this letter:

- The church is Christ’s body, with Christ as the head
- The church is a building, built on the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone
- The church is like a wife, with Christ as the husband

Today we reflect on a further metaphor – “the armour of God” which we are to put on. This image reminds us that “living like people who belong to the light” may not always be easy. We have to contend with spiritual opposition.



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The image of armour that’s given to believers by God may not be quite as accessible for us as some of the other metaphors used in the book of Ephesians. It may not be as easy for us to relate to as it would have been for Paul’s readers. It might be worth noting that (other than the sword) the equipment provided for

us, that we are to put on, is defensive. Perhaps we might think of the analogy of “protective gear” used by some sports people, or, indeed, those working in hospitals at this time.

There’s some debate about what Paul means about “the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age” and Christians also differ in their understanding of “the devil”. I read somewhere this week that “conservative Christians too often overspiritualize the devil and demons, and progressive Christians reduce these forces to social justice issues.” You may be familiar with CS Lewis’ comments along similar lines: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.” What do you make of these comments? What might we glean from Scripture?

The Bible takes evil seriously but nowhere suggests that its power is remotely equivalent to the goodness and strength of God. The gospels depict Jesus facing spiritual opposition from the beginning of his public ministry. The writers tell us that at the outset of his ministry Jesus resisted temptation by Satan (Matt 4, Mark 1, Luke 4). People then flock to Jesus to receive not only physical but spiritual healing, and, much to everyone’s amazement, through Jesus’ authority many people are freed from the influence of evil spirits (eg: Luke 4:31-37). Jesus teaches his disciples (in the words of the Lord’s Prayer) to pray that they will be “delivered from evil” and he promises that he will send the Holy Spirit to strengthen and help them (and us) (John 14-17).

Paul was writing this letter to the church (or perhaps group of churches) at Ephesus from prison. For him, and for the early disciples, opposition to the Christian faith was not an abstract concept. We can imagine the earnestness with which these words requesting that his readers will pray for him might have been written: “Pray also for me, that God will give me a message when I am ready to speak, so that I may speak boldly and make known the gospel’s secret. For the sake of this gospel I am an ambassador, though now I am in prison. Pray that I may be bold in speaking about the gospel as I should” (Eph 6:19-20).

We are blessed in New Zealand that religious tolerance is extolled as a virtue but we are all aware that this is not the case in many other parts of the world. In January this year, the UK Guardian newspaper presented some sobering statistics relating to the persecution of Christians: “Persecution of Christians around the world has increased during the Covid pandemic, with followers being refused aid in many countries, authoritarian governments stepping up surveillance, and Islamic militants exploiting the crisis, a report says. More than 340 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith, according to the 2021 “World Watch List” compiled by the Christian advocacy group Open Doors.” Open Doors’ “World Watch List” is a list of top 50 countries where people experience persecution because of their faith. “The Vatican News” reported on last year’s World Watch List like this: “Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked and 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned.” Some of you might have lived in parts of the world where such things have occurred.

Here in New Zealand we can face some insidious challenges to faith apart from persecution. In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:13-20) Jesus pointed out that faith is easily crowded out by pressures and distractions: “The worries about this life, the love for riches, and all other kinds of desires crowd in and choke the message.” We can be lulled into believing that our worth is tied up with prestige, power or keeping up with the Joneses, and thus focus on these things. We can also get caught up in the kinds of behaviours Paul tells his readers in Ephesians 5 are “things that belong to the darkness”. Paul says, “Put on all the armour that God gives you!”

So, let's turn now to those three "P's" I mentioned earlier.

Prepare.

Ephesians 6:10 says, "Build up your strength in union with the Lord and by means of his mighty power."

This week I learned some interesting things about this verse which are clear in the original Greek but get lost in English. I hope that you find them interesting, too. First, the verbs and pronouns used here, and throughout the passage, are plural. Although we usually think of armour as being put on by individuals, here "you" means the church, not individual members of it. We shall return to that point shortly. Secondly, most translations of verse 10 begin with the exhortation to "be strong" (or words to that effect). But in the Greek, this instruction is actually in the passive voice – in other words, "be made strong" in the Lord. The readers aren't being told to try very hard to be strong but are being reminded to depend on "his mighty power". As I read somewhere this week: "The resources needed for resistance and perseverance do not flow out of the community's own strength, power or innate abilities. Rather the needed resources are given to the community by God." That's reassuring! Paul urges his readers to be prepared and to "stand ready" by putting on God's armour before it's needed (vs 12).

Persevere.

Paul also exhorts his readers to stand up, hold their ground, stand ready, and to hold their ground when they face opposition. Stand firm! This can seem daunting. I was encouraged by reading these words from Brian Peterson, at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary:

"This "standing firm" (verse 13) is not something that we can do by ourselves, but only as a community. The instruction to "be strengthened" in verse 10 is also a present tense verb which emphasizes the continuing nature of this strengthening. It is not experienced all at once, but is part of the ongoing life of the church together. We might render verse 10's overarching instruction as "all of you together, keep on being strengthened by the Lord." It is something with which we are never finished, but which points to the life-long habit of trusting God and finding life, love, and strength there."

I hope you find those words as heartening as I did.

Pray.

Paul writes, "Pray on every occasion, as the Spirit leads. Be alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people" (Eph 6:18).

If we do not know how or what to pray the Lord's prayer is always a good place to start. It guides us into honouring God, praying for God's will to be done, praying for the needs of others, and depending on God for our own needs. As we noted earlier, too, Jesus also models here how to pray when we face temptation or opposition.

We can also pray without words. Last year I ordered on-line an inflatable globe because I simply had no idea how to pray about the Covid pandemic or other situations that concerned me. I felt helpless. Holding that globe in my arms as I prayed silently was the way I chose to commit the world's needs – or sometimes the needs of particular countries – to God. We pray "as the Spirit leads."

I had asked Alan Simson and Robin McKee to lead our prayers of intercession at the church this week. I would like to conclude this reflection by including the prayers that they were to read for us. Some of you might choose to use them as a framework for your own prayers today. I have left Alan and Robin's names in the prayers so that you might imagine their voices, and perhaps have a sense of our church community praying together. "All of you together, keep on being strengthened by the Lord."

Prayers for others, based on Ephesians 6 "Armour of God"

Anne

1. Almighty God, thank you for providing us with spiritual armour so that we may withstand temptation and gladly serve you and others. When our faith is tested, help us to rely on the armour you have given us.

Alan

2. We put on the belt of truth.
We desire that truth and justice will be experienced by people in our community, our country and throughout the world.
We pray for those who suffer when truth is distorted or willfully abandoned. Help us, and all your Church, to live with integrity as we seek to follow Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Robin

3. We put on the breastplate of righteousness.
We give thanks for all people who seek to do what is good and kind and right, whether at home, in the workplace, or in positions of wide influence.
We pray that you will protect and strengthen them in their endeavours, by the power of your Spirit.

Alan

4. We put on shoes of readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace.
Teach and equip us to be bearers of your peace, O God.
Protect and bless people who are peacemakers, especially those working in dangerous situations at this time.

Robin

5. We hold the shield of faith.
Today we think especially of Christians who are persecuted or treated unjustly because of their faith.
We pray for all people who are feeling overwhelmed by life's challenges, and for those whose faith feels fragile at this time.
In silence we bring before you people who have asked for our prayers and situations of particular concern.

Silence

Alan

6. We wear the helmet of salvation.
Loving God, we recognise our need for forgiveness and renewal and we pray that people who are burdened by regrets or shame may turn to you and find healing within your church.

Robin

7. We hold the sword of the Spirit.
O God, strengthen us so that we may stand firm at times of testing, and always be ready to share with others the love and grace we have received.

Anne We ask these things through Christ our Lord.
And all the people said – **Amen.**