

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Ephesians - it's all about Christ: Standing for Him - Ephesians 6:10-20

The story is told of a young girl who lived in a remote village with her family. During a period of warfare, the enemy soldiers came to her village and ransacked the place. They frogmarched everyone into the village square and lined them up, from the chief to the least important villager. She was somewhere near the end of the queue. From the church they had destroyed they took a picture of Jesus and threw it down into the dust. They told everyone to spit on the picture if they wanted to go free. The village chief was first. He looked at the villagers and thought they needed him. He had responsibilities that could not be avoided, and so he slowly walked forward, spat on the picture and returned to his home. One by one, the villagers spat upon the picture, until the young girl came forward. She had seen her parents walk free, and she could still see her younger brothers and sisters in the queue. Kneeling down she wiped all the spit off the picture, before standing again and saying, "Lord Jesus, I love you". The soldiers stepped forward and shot her on the spot.

To my mind she tells us everything we need to know about standing for Jesus. As we come to the end of our series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning, we will continue to see that it is truly all about Christ. For the young girl in our story all that mattered was Jesus, everything else was of secondary importance. That is the spirit that we need to get back in our lives. Too easily, the ordinary affairs of life, often quite legitimate matters, so crowd in upon us that we lose sight of the primary reason why He leaves us here - that of standing for Him, where He has put us. Let us then finish reading the Epistle, starting at Ephesians 6:11. "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. 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. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints - and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. But that you also may know my affairs and how I am doing, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make all things known to you; whom I have sent to you for this very purpose, that you may know our affairs, and that he may comfort your hearts. Peace to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen."

Standing is a very individual thing. It only needs one soldier to turn and run, before the ripple effect means that the whole line has disintegrated. On the other hand, if each individual stands then the line remains unbroken. Interestingly, in Deuteronomy 20:8, where God gives instruction as to how Israel was to wage war, the officers are told to speak to the people, and tell them that any who are afraid were just to go home, in case the hearts of the rest were to be infected. For God, who had promised that He would fight for Israel, numbers weren't everything.

This morning, we shall think of what it means for us to stand for Him in three ways.

1. Know your ground;
2. Know your enemy; and then finally,
3. Know your armour.

Know your ground

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." Ephesians 6:10. It is said of the Duke of Wellington that before the battle of Waterloo, for a period of many weeks he rode out around the country to find just the right spot on which to make a stand. He planned the course of the whole battle long before the two armies had even formed. The ground he wanted was to offer protection for his infantry battalions so that the power of the French cannon could not be brought to bear. It simply would not have done to pick any old field. Such a policy would have led to defeat! So as believers on the Lord Jesus Christ we need to be careful to choose the spiritual ground upon which we are to stand. Paul has made it quite clear that it is upon the Lord that we must stand and in the power of His might.

Leckie, in his commentary on this verse says "Power (*kratos*) is force superior to all opposition and might (*ischus*) inherent vital power! There is with the Lord an inherent ability to employ force greater than anything that might oppose." We ought never to aim to serve the Lord in our own strength or to meet difficult circumstances by our own ingenuity. Such a course of action will surely lead to defeat. But if, by a continuous attitude of prayer, we meet any action in His strength then we must be assured of victory. I have always loved the roll call of David's mighty men. Let us just read of a couple of them in 2 Samuel 23:9-12: "And after him was Eleazar the son of Dodo, the Ahohite, one of the three mighty men with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel had retreated. He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to plunder. And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines had gathered together into a troop where there was a piece of ground full of lentils. So the people fled from the Philistines. But he stationed himself in the middle of the field, defended it, and killed the Philistines. So the Lord brought about a great victory." Here were two individuals, no different from you or me, who knew their God. They knew that the land they were in was theirs from God and that the Philistines had no right to it. And so they stood.

In our circumstances we need to make a similar stand upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and the plainly revealed will in the Bible. We need to guard against choosing the wrong ground. Great men and women of God from the past, types of hymns and hymnbooks, format of service, versions of the Bible - the list could go on and on as some of the things that Christians have used as the basis upon which they live their lives. Such ground is sure to fail. We also need to guard against moving from sure ground to find something new. Modern society is always looking for something new, something different. As believers, having established what is right, we need to make our stand and not move from that. It is not right, to use a made up example, to compare Hezekiah 2:6 with the marginal reading of 3 Corinthians 1:9 to infer that what Paul says no longer applies to us today. God has fully revealed Himself to us in the person of His One and only Son. The kind of behaviour He now expects from us has been given to us in the Epistles. All we need to do to be assured of victory is to accept their plain statements and nothing else. Simple! If there is no plain statement we do not make one up. If there is, obey it. This is the ground upon which we can, like Shammah and Eleazar, allow the Lord to work a great victory.

Know your enemy

We need to know the enemy we face. Warfare used to be so simple. Two armies got together on a field and clobbered each other until last man standing won. Today, we hardly know who the enemy is, until the young schoolgirl detonates a huge semtex explosive belt strapped to her waist - but by then it is too late! Paul outlines in Ephesians 6:12 who we are up against in our spiritual warfare. It is not against flesh and blood. People are not the enemy, although the powers that we are to combat may use real people. Christians should not engage in personal attacks against those who oppose what we believe. Ridicule of them on a personal level is not acceptable. Nor do we oppose people who are not living in a way that conforms to what the Bible says. I am not convinced that the placard waving opposition that sometimes goes on in the name of Christ is really the best way forward. If our battle was against flesh and blood then these things might be the way forward. I seem to remember there being a fish, perhaps the angler fish, which has a long protrusion from its head which it waves about. It attracts the attention of its prey, and whilst the prey is watching the protrusion, the angler fish attacks with its fearsome teeth. The little fish was distracted by the wrong enemy. The Bible is quite clear that we are to take the love of God to a needy world, and that is difficult when we are clobbering them over the head with a placard. Does that mean that we have no impact on this present evil society? Not at all! For our true enemies are the principalities and powers that lie behind wrong behaviour, and the host of evil forces which energise them. We forget at our peril that, in this material, physical world, the devil is every bit as much at work as he has always been, trying to break down and destroy all that is good.

So what is the name of our enemy? Today, in 21st Century Britain it goes by the name of materialism. All that matters is what is physical. It expresses itself in so many ways. We need to have the latest fashion, or a TV for each room, or a car with all the trims and extras we don't actually need. Greed leaves a disproportionate amount of wealth in the hands of the few. We buy things we will hardly ever wear or use just to reflect our status in society. Sadly, as believers we are not immune from this. Rather we should seek to live as simply as possible, accepting from Him the good things that we do enjoy. It also goes by the name of sexism, that is creating conflict between men and women. Sexism says one is better than another whereas God says that all are created in His image. Sexism would deny the differences that there are between us pulling down those things that are strengths of one particular gender. God gives each a special role in His order that each are uniquely suited to. It is called individualism, by which we mean that anybody can do just as they please so long as it does not affect others. Our responsibility to others is completely ignored and we become selfish. It is the government's responsibility to do this, that or the other, rather than our own responsibility. So the rights of the individual are more important than the individual's responsibilities to their family or society. We see all too clearly the results of this in family breakdown and the fractured society that now exists. To put it bluntly, God says to put Him first, others second and yourself last! It is called something for nothing. The boss expects me to take work home with me to get a job done but would laugh at the thought of paying overtime. Workers phone in sick when they

are anything but. It leads to theft and oppression. God says that all things have a price, for He paid the ultimate price when He gave His Son to die on the cross.

Time does not allow to list all the forces that oppose us. They originate with the devil and are energised by demonic power. Sometimes their influence is so all pervasive that we think that they are normal. Only by a daily living out of what is in the Bible can we hope to maintain a right sense of what is good. Perhaps if we went round the supermarket praying quickly over each item we put in the trolley we would notice a difference to our weekly shop. Perhaps if I spoke to my wife the way I would speak to Jesus, when I got home after a busy day at work, then things would be different at home. Perhaps if I spend less time looking at what I didn't have and more time caring for others, I would be a great deal happier. As Christians the struggle is a daily one, a war of attrition that will continue until He secures the final victory. Only by constant vigilance can we hope to repel the constant onslaught to our values, our morals and our emotions.

Know your armour

Finally, we need to know our armour. One of the things I really enjoy is visiting castles and other ancient places. Part of the enjoyment is in seeing the big suits of armour and hearing about past battles and the like. I guess I could probably name all the different pieces of armour and in what order they are put on. However, if I was to wear a suit and then be challenged to a duel, I think I would politely decline. You see, although I may have some head knowledge of the armour, I have no inner confidence that when my life is on the line it will do me any good. When we speak about knowing our armour, it is not just a head knowledge of each piece that we need, but more importantly a working real life experience that each piece does what it is there for. This can only come by experience. We have a tremendous picture of this in 1 Samuel 17. David, who is visiting his brothers at the battlefield, hears the blasphemous challenge of the giant Goliath to single combat. He is ready to take up the challenge, and so in 1 Samuel 17:38-39 we read: "So Saul clothed David with his armour, and he put a bronze helmet on his head; he also clothed him with a coat of mail. David fastened his sword to his armour and tried to walk, for he had not tested them. And David said to Saul, 'I cannot walk in these, for I have not tested them.' So David took them off." David was not sure the armour would do the job, besides it may not have fitted properly. But David did have confidence in his God, his staff and his sling, for they had seen him through previous battles with a lion and a bear.

As we read through Ephesians 6 and consider the armour that God has provided, do we read about it in an intellectual way, debating what is meant by a particular phrase, or do we have firsthand experience that has kept us safe in the heat of battle? It is the latter of these that Paul would have been urging on his Ephesian readers.

First comes the belt of truth. We hardly realise how important our waist is until we get lower back pain, and find we can hardly walk, or bend, or move. Life becomes very uncomfortable. So our walk as believers, the way we live our lives, is to be controlled by truth. Supremely, Jesus is the truth, and the full revelation of Him and what He wants for and from us is found in the Bible. Our whole lives need to be directed in every sphere by what we find there. Perhaps you have seen the bracelets with the letters 'WWJD' on - 'What Would Jesus Do'. It would be no bad thing if we only did what Jesus did, and always did what Jesus would do! If we know that we are living a lie, we will inevitably have little strength to resist the spiritual onslaught that will come against us. It is upon the belt that all the other pieces rest. I remember being told that with a full suit of armour, the encased soldier would be almost immobile and totally exhausted within a matter of a minute or two were it not for the fact that the weight of each piece is fed through to, and borne by the belt. What God has said needs to be the basis of all that we do. When it is, then on a daily basis we need to tell the truth and live out the truth.

Next we come to the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate covers our chest, front and back, so that our heart is protected. It is His righteousness that is in view here. God loves us and we love Him because of His righteousness. Our position and our every blessing depends upon His completed work upon the cross. So often, the devil will accuse us with thoughts along the lines "How can you do that? You are supposed to be saved!" At just such times, we need this breastplate to know that we are accepted by God because of who Jesus is. Of course, if He is righteous then it is only fitting for us to live a life of righteousness. Otherwise, we will allow cracks to develop in the armour that allow accusations of hypocrisy to penetrate.

Our feet are to be covered with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to walk on a pebbly beach or pavement without any shoes on. The point at which we come into contact with this world needs to be covered. The realisation that I have been brought to a relationship of peace with God should cover my relationship with the world. Because I belong to Christ, I don't need to have a bigger house than my neighbour. I am already an heir of all things. Now I am here to represent Him. So I ought always to be ready to share that Gospel with those who need it. I do not need to wear shoes if I am not going out! So too, if I never have any contact with the unsaved who live in this world, I will hardly need my feet covered. His calling is one which instructs us to "Go out into all the world"! (Mark 16:15)

Next we are to take the shield of faith. The word Paul used for shield is the one for the large interlocking shield that formed part of the legion's shield wall. We may not understand everything there is in the Bible but together we are to stand firm, meeting together on what the Bible says. There is tremendous strength in regular fellowship, whereas an isolated Christian is a vulnerable Christian. There may, of course, be times when He calls us to stand for Him alone, perhaps in the work place, or in a particular circumstance, but so far as is possible, we ought not to neglect regular meeting with other believers. (Hebrews 10:25)

The helmet of salvation is given to us to protect our minds. The devil is constantly trying to confuse us with doubts and uncertainties. Am I truly saved? Is it worth carrying on? Is there any point to my service? Etc, etc. At just such times, we need to fill our minds with the fact that He has saved us, He has promised to be with us and He has promised to bring us safely home. There is eternal security in knowing the Lord Jesus as Saviour.

Finally, we are also given the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Strictly speaking the word used for 'word', *rhema*, is the spoken word rather than the written word. The Holy Spirit will speak a word to us at just the right time when it is needed. We might ask ourselves how is this likely to be done? Three times when the Lord was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), He met the devil with the words, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4, 7 and 10). The pattern has been set for us.

We also need to be ready to live our lives and to meet temptation by using the word of God. But to do so necessitates two things:

1. We need to know what the Bible says. The Spirit of God is well able to bring a verse or phrase of the Bible to mind to protect us when necessary. But if we have never read it in the first place, then we leave ourselves defenceless.
2. As any soldier would undergo training, we need to think ahead whenever possible. When I daily read the Bible, I need to make a mental note of a particular verse or phrase that might cover a particular situation, so that when it does arise, I am ready.

It is given to each one of us, whatever our circumstances, to stand for Him in our generation. This is my spiritual responsibility. It is what He has called each one of us to today. Let each one of us, in the strength of the Lord, and using what He has given us, be ready to stand for Him, using the divinely revealed truth of God as the ground upon which to make that stand.

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