**Prayer Warriors Stand Firm**

Text: Ephesians 6:13-24

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:10-24

**Songs Chosen:** ‘Behold out God’, [SttL] 216, 138, 491, 184

**Series:** Ephesians (#28)

**Theme:**  The Apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesian believers to put on the whole armour of God in order to be able to stand firm in the spiritual struggle against the Devil and his evil associates, praying with alert perseverance for others in their battles as they live out the gospel with the blessings of God in Christ.

**Proposition:**  The fully equipped prayer warrior stands firm in Christ.

**Introduction**

Some people have said that COVID-19 is just a hoax – a malicious deception by powerful people to control populations through fear, manipulation and falsehood. If you ask the question, “*will some people, and potentially some governments, try to use the current pandemic for their own agendas and evil aims*”, then the answer is ‘yes’, that is exactly how fallen human nature tends to behave. This is no ‘conspiracy theory’ – it’s a plain fact. However, if you ask a different question – “*Is there really a Coronavirus which is damaging to human health and has led to the deaths of many people in the world this year?*”, then the answer is ‘yes’ – it’s a plain fact.

Convince somebody that a danger doesn’t exist, and they will see no reason to be alert and prepared. One of Satan’s most effective deceptions is to convince people that he doesn’t actually exist, except perhaps as a somewhat humorous character in books or movies with a red fiery face, horns and a pitchfork with three spikes.

As the Apostle Paul brings his letter to the Ephesian Christians to a close, he explains why the Christian life, about which he has been writing since chapter 4, is a struggle. This struggle exists because Satan is a real spiritual being; a deceiver who actively works together with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places to oppose God and His people. This is ultimately why we face battles in marriage, family, and in our places of work. It has been this way since Satan first engaged with human beings in the form of a serpent. He attacked the first marriage with lies and deceit. The first family was broken by the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. After the fall, work became a troublesome toil involving pain. Difficulty has become the ‘new normal’ in childbirth, in the fields where thorns and thistles make labour laborious and in all other work.

We saw last week (from Ephesians 6:10-13) the call to stand strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might as we wrestle against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. There are two key components in a soldier’s preparation for battle: physical and mental fitness and resilience training so that the warrior has the strength to fight in a battle; and equipment training so that they know how to use clothing and weapons effectively for both defensive and offensive action. Similarly, these two components are identified in Ephesians 6. Last week, our focus was on the call to stand strong in Christ’s strength as we fight Satan’s evil forces. Today we first focus on the ‘equipment’, the spiritual armour, which the Lord provides for us in our struggle.

1. **The Whole Armour of God**

Since the fall of our first ancestors, clothes have been worn throughout history. We all have them, and we can all relate to wearing them. Earlier in this letter, the Apostle Paul used the metaphor of physical clothing to describe the spiritual reality of sanctification – becoming more like Christ in character, in holiness, in righteousness. Here is the ‘spiritual dressing room’ for the Christian: “*put off your old self*” (4:22) and “*put on the new self*” (4:24).

In chapter 6, the same clothing metaphor is used to describe the equipment that a soldier needs for the spiritual struggle. “*Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil*” (v11). Because all followers of Christ are in the midst of a battle, everyone needs to “*take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm”* (v13).

When Paul’s first readers in the region of Ephesus first heard the description of spiritual armour, they would likely have thought of a Roman soldier with a leather belt, a large shield, a pair of sandals and a short sword. Military men were an ‘everyday’ sight in 1st century Ephesus which was the capital of the Roman province of Asia.

However, in this armour imagery, Paul draws from the Old Testament Scriptures where God Himself is revealed as coming to the defence of His people as a Mighty Warrior prepared for battle. Isaiah prophesies “*He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak*” (Isa 59:17). Brothers and sisters, the combat uniform which we all called to take up and put on is given to us by God., who has ‘worn’ this spiritual armour to defeat His enemy and ours. As we look briefly at this equipment piece by piece, remember that Christ has already put on this armour for us as the Mighty Warrior who fought on our behalf.

* The ‘belt’ refers to a strap put around the waist to secure the undergarments in preparation for action (cf. Luke 12:35; 1 Pet 1:13). In Bible times, people would ‘gird their loins’ by gathering up their flowing garments in preparation for running or for battle. The ‘belt of truth’ speaks of inner integrity, of ‘*truth in the inward being*’ (Ps 51:6); a person ‘held together’ in the confidence and assurance they have in God’s ‘true truth’.
* The ‘breastplate of righteousness’ could either refer to the imputed/credited righteousness of God (Gen 15:6) in Christ or to the uprightness of character of the believer. Paul’s reference to the ‘weapons of righteousness’ in 2 Cor 6:7 suggests that this righteousness is someone’s obedience to God’s law. The idea is then that the person who willingly obeys the Lord is equipped for spiritual struggle by their righteous living. It’s worth noting that in 1 Thess 5:8, the ‘breastplate’ there is ‘faith and love’ so we should be careful not to over-interpret the armour metaphor in too much detail.
* Then there are the “*shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace*” (v15). Just as sturdy shoes provide a firm foothold in battle so the inner peace of heart and mind which results from trusting in the Lord (e.g. Phil 4:7) stabilises and secures the Christian warrior. From this strong stance, the gospel of peace and reconciliation is proclaimed to the world (cf. Isaiah 52:7).
* The ‘shield of faith’ is protective equipment against the ‘flaming darts of the evil one’ (v16). In Romans times, a wooden-framed shield, covered in hide, and bound with iron top and bottom was ordinarily carried on the left arm. When dipped in water before a battle it could extinguish flaming arrows which had been coated in pitch and set alight. The message here is that faith shields us from the enemy. When Satan, the Father of Lies, accuses believers like you and me, speaking into our minds thoughts like these: “*How weak you are. You say that you are a Christian, yet you fail again and again to live up to the standards of Scripture. Do you really think believe that God loves you, will protect you and allow you into His kingdom? Surely not. You don’t deserve anything from God”.* Faith extinguishes such fiery darts by responding like this: “*You are partly right Satan. I don’t deserve anything from God, yet because of His glorious grace by which He has accepted me in Christ and loves me as His son/daughter. I belong to Him*”.
* The ‘helmet of salvation’ protects the head – a vital body part. Salvation is a gift of God (Eph 2:4-5) which He gives because of ‘His great mercy’. The grace of God also protects us from the power of sin as we hope in Christ (ref. 1 Thess 5:8).
* The ‘sword of the Spirit’ is the powerful Word of God which is wielded by the warrior who is influenced by the Holy Spirit; both in defence and attack. We see this ‘sword’ in action as Christ, being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11), responds to temptation with the precise and powerful words of Scripture. Christ overcame the enemy with the truth of the Word, ‘*then the devil left him*’ (Matt 4:11). Christ’s Word weapon (also ref. Rev 19:15) is our weapon too.

Armour is of no benefit in battle if it remains stored in the armoury or is left lying on the ground. Physical armour must be taken up and put on. So it is with spiritual armour. We must put it on if we are to stand firm in the struggle. Christ has demonstrated for us how effective this spiritual equipment is when accompanied by prayer, which brings us to our 2nd point.

1. **Alert Persistent Prayer**

If we would learn how to ‘*be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might*’ we must look to Christ, the Warrior who has fought for us. He is a man of persistent prayer. In the garden of Gethsemane, in agony He prayed earnestly "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42). However, his disciples were sleeping, despite the Lord having said to them ‘*pray that you may not enter into temptation*’ (Luke 22:40).

Many vehicle accidents can occur due to tiredness or someone falling asleep ‘at the wheel’. When we are physically tired, we can be distracted, unobservant, and unaware of the danger we face. One of Satan’s tricks is to tempt us to become ‘spiritually sleepy’. That is why Peter, one of the disciples who was asleep at Gethsemane before Jesus was arrested, later wrote: “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Pet 5:8). That night in the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples needed to be alert and persistent in their prayers so that they would not be tempted to fight the battle which was about to start with the wrong equipment or else to flee. When Judas came to betray Christ with a kiss, someone did take a sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear (Mark 14:47) which Jesus then supernaturally healed (Luke 22:51).

Prayer was essential in the struggle at Gethsemane, physical weapons were of no value. Prayer is not so much a part of the spiritual armour; it is more about the way in which this equipment is to be worn. The stance of the warrior is to be a thoroughly prayerful one. You can see the absolutely essential importance of prayer from the way the word ‘all’ is repeatedly used in verse 18 to qualify what has gone before. “*praying at* ***all*** *times in the Spirit, with* ***all*** *prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with* ***all*** *perseverance, making supplication for* ***all*** *the saints*”. Prayer is to be the continuous activity of the warrior who engages the spiritual forces of evil (1 Thess 5:17). Prayer is to cover all the aspects of our needs and the needs of others. Prayer is to persevere through distresses, discouragements, and disappointments being alert to the changing circumstances in the battle. Prayer is to be for all the fellow saints in the battle.

We’ve already seen the importance of prayer in this letter as Paul prays with thanksgiving for wisdom for the Ephesians (1:16-18). Now he asks for them to pray for him so that he would be given the words to boldly proclaim the gospel which is revealed in and through Christ. From the prison where he wrote this letter, Paul knew that apart from the prayers of fellow soldiers in the spiritual struggle, he could not live the life he was called to in Christ. Paul was not alone in the battle and in closing he mentions Tychicus, the ‘*beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord*’ (v21) whom he had sent to the Ephesians - as Paul was not free to go himself (2 Tim 4:12).

Last week I made mention of some of the means by which the Lord is pleased to strengthen us in the spiritual battle; being part of worship services and attending Bible study and fellowship groups. It is not that these activities in themselves automatically strengthen us, but that the Lord uses these means and others, including personal Scriptural meditation to supernaturally equip us for spiritual warfare. These are not earthly processes, but heavenly ones, a spiritual strengthening in the Lord which is dependent on prayer. The vital importance of the prayers of God’s people in the heavenly places is clear in the book of Revelation where the 24 elders fall down in worship before the Lamb, each holding ‘*golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints*’.

One of Satan’s most effective schemes is to convince the unwary that he does not exist. Another trick is to persuade people that prayer is ineffective and pointless. The fully equipped spiritual warrior is a praying person who struggles in the Lord’s strength against the ‘*spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*’ and whose prayers are answered with gracious gifts given to comfort and empower them. This brings us to our 3rd point.

1. **The Lord blesses His Soldiers**

At the end of his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul gives a closing ‘benediction’ – a blessing in the form of a prayer that the Lord would continue to supply the Christian soldiers that he writes to with everything that they need. He writes: “*Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible*” (Eph 6:23-24). ‘Peace’ was one of the words of opening greeting at the start of this letter (1:1).

This peace is first and foremost a relationship of harmony, acceptance and love with and for God Himself. This peace has come because of Christ, in whom ‘*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*’ (1:7). In Christ, there is no longer a separation between the sinner, now forgiven, and God the Almighty Creator and Judge. This peace is first and foremost a restored ‘vertical’ relationship with God, but it is also a restored set of ‘horizontal’ relationships with others. We heard the call in chapter 4 of this letter to “*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of* ***peace***” (4:1-3).

‘*Love with faith*’ in verse 23 is a gift from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the love which we saw in chapter 5 is the love of choice, the love of serving with humility, the highest kind of love, the noblest kind of devotion, the love of the will under the influence of the Holy Spirit. This is the love with which *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”.* This is the love which God enables His Spirit-filled prayer warriors who wear His amour to have for others as they trust in His strength and power in their spiritual struggle. Peace, love and faith are all gifts which God freely bestows on those He has chosen in Christ.

Paul’s prayer is that the Lord would continue to bless His Christian soldiers with his grace as they love the One who first loved them (1 John 4:19). Paul knew that standing strong in the Lord was not easy. Remember, that he was in prison when this letter was written. He had suffered much, experiencing many setbacks as he lived for Christ, including beatings, being shipwrecked, living in constant danger, toil and hardship (2 Cor 11:24-27). In addition he had the daily burden of concern for the churches (2 Cor 11:28). He knew his own weaknesses (2 Cor 12:10). He knew himself. He knew his enemy and was not deceived to think either that Satan did not exist, or that prayer was ineffective, or that he was strong in himself

Paul strength was ‘*in the Lord and in the strength of his might*’ having put on the whole armour of God, praying at all times in the Spirit. Did Paul have an easy life following Christ – absolutely not! Was he blessed as a soldier of Christ – most definitely! He knew that Christ had won the ultimate victory over sin and death at the cross and thereby ultimately defeating Satan. He loved Christ the Supreme Prayer Warrior who had stood firm for him with a love which would never perish.

Where are you today? Are you standing strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might? Or are you in need of restoration to become strong? Have you put on the whole armour of God? Or are you neglecting personal integrity in the truth and righteous living? Do you know the peace of God in your heart and mind which stabilises you in the turmoil of this life? Is your faith a strong protection against the schemes of the Devil, or is your faith wavering? Are you fully assured of your own salvation? Or do you doubt the mercy of God towards you in Christ? Are you able to rightly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim 2;15)? or do you neglect study and meditation in the Scriptures? Are you a prayer warrior? “*praying at* ***all*** *times in the Spirit, with* ***all*** *prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with* ***all*** *perseverance, making supplication for* ***all*** *the saints*”.

Whatever your state of heart and mind today, come to Christ. In Him alone you will find strength. In Him you will find the blessings of peace, love with faith and the grace of God to enable you to stand firm as a prayer warrior who struggles against the spiritual forces in the heavenly places knowing that in Christ you are safe and secure.

So let’s continue to struggle in Christ’s strength, continue to pray, continue to trust in our Lord and continue to love Him with a love which never fades.

AMEN.