

As I was preparing for today I had last Sunday and Remembrance very much in my mind and with it the whole theme of courage. As one who is a devoted coward I have to say I find that I find the whole thing of fighting difficult and how men and women found the courage to do battle. However I was encouraged by one soldier's testimony that even though he had been given a decoration for his bravery he admitted that he had been scared all the time!

When someone says be strong or be courageous it makes me go a little weak inside because I'm thinking that they only say that when they know there is trouble ahead or a battle that is not looking good.

Today we take a one Sunday break before drawing our series on Galatians to a close and we look at these verses from Eph 6:10-18 and the first words of Paul and "Finally be strong...." – help!

However, rather than run and hide I'm going to look with us at these verses and ask three questions: Why did these Christians in Ephesus need to be strong? How were they to gain strength and what did they need to do to gain that strength? Through it I am sure that we will also learn from Paul how we can "be strong".

1. Why did they need to be strong? V10-13

Well the short answer is that to live as a Christian is to be in a battle situation. Gordon mentioned that last week in the sermon from Galatians 5. Paul encouraged Timothy to "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12).

Here twice he speaks about them taking a stand. He urges them to be strong v11 "so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" and v13 "so that when the evil day comes you will be able to stand your ground". They needed to be strong to stand against the devil's evil schemes and to stand on the evil day.

What did Paul mean? The devil is implacably opposed to God and his desire is to prevent God's will and rule being worked out. We see that right back in the garden of Eden where his deceit and trickery tore Adam and Eve away from their relationship with God. The devil is eager to hinder our walk with Jesus Christ. The evil day seems to refer to special times when we as individuals and we as a church come under the attack of the Devil.

We need to realise that we are not as it were living in a neutral environment. God may want us for a sunbeam but the devil is eager to snuff out the light. We know that following Christ is not easy and that many things hold us back. Here Paul reminds us that these are not just things that happen. He reminds us that the devil and the forces of evil are seeking to hinder us as we run the Xn race. You may be able to remember back to the old cartoon programme the whacky races. It had in it Dick Dastardly and his dog Muttley and they wanted to win the race so much they would stop at nothing

and were always trying to force others out of the race, the Gruesome twosome, Penelope Pistop the Anthill mob etc. The devil is at work to knock us off course and if possible put us out of the Christian race completely. This is why we need to be strong so that we can stand against his deceit and against any times when he specifically attacks us.

2. How are we to be strong? V10

Well the answer is not by going to the gym and body building. Nor is it by learning some martial arts so that we can defend ourselves. Paul is clear about how we can be strong and it is “in the Lord and in his mighty power”.

Paul had earlier in the letter prayed that these Christians might know God better, and “his incomparably great power for us who believe.” (1:19) This is the power that Paul wanted these Christians to rely on in the face of the devil’s deceit and attacks. It is not a power Christians can produce for themselves, it comes from God.

Daily the battle is there in us. It may be a battle with temptation, with sin, with doubt, with pain, with fear of the future, with persecution at work or home because of our faith. It may be many things which the devil uses to cause us to drop out of the Christian race. In all of these God can and will provide the strength so that we can continue to walk the way of Christ. We are not asked to struggle on on our own.

3. What do we do to draw on this strength? Vs 14-18

Paul describes drawing on God’s strength like putting on armour. It was a fitting illustration in part because as he wrote these words he was under arrest in a Roman prison and so would regularly see Roman soldiers around the place. But also it is fitting because if they and we see ourselves in a battle then it is protective armour that we need to help us be strong and help us stand the wiles and attacks of our enemy.

It all starts again this week. What I mean is the battle for the ashes. Alastair Cook and his team battling with the Australians for a tiny urn. The batsmen will come out to face hostile bowling with plenty of armour on to protect themselves so that they can stand and not only stand up to the Australian attack but also take the attack to them and over come them.

Paul in his letter describes the armour and we can see how each piece has its role in combating the work of the devil. Let’s take a quick trip through these verses and the different parts of the whole armour of God.

a. the belt of truth. The belt was not part of the armour but was used underneath to bind everything else together out of the way so that the soldier was fit for action. Truth not only undergirds us and readies us for action but also protects us against devil's deceit and distortion.

Many years back I heard a story of how Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon were viewing a military parade in Moscow. Alexander couldn't take his eyes off the tanks. "With chariots like these I could have taken the whole of Asia," he said. Caesar eyed the missiles. "If I'd had such arrows I could have ruled the world." Napoleon glanced up from the copy of Pravda he was reading, "with a paper like this," he exclaimed, "no one would ever have heard of Waterloo!"

It is often the case in times of war that the warring parties will withhold information and even put out false information to fool their opponents. The devil also deceives and distorts. He tries to distort our understanding of God and our understanding of our relationship with him. He tries to drive a wedge between us through his lies. But God gives us his truth in the Bible to undergird our faith so that we can dismiss the deceit of the devil. We need regularly to read the Bible and hear it explained so that we stand on a strong basis of truth as we live out our Christian lives.

b. the breastplate of righteousness. The word righteousness here means God's act of grace by which he accepts us as right with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

It helps us to repel the attacks of accusation and especially the accusation of guilt. "You don't think your God will forgive you that do you? What that sin again? It's hopeless you're never going to change. Give up you're too bad to get into heaven.... "

Is that your experience? The effect is to deflate us. To knock us off line. To make us think that perhaps we are too bad that God won't forgive us. The breastplate of righteousness deflects such accusations. It assures us that God, who alone can judge, declares me righteous in Christ no matter what I have done and no matter what men or devil may say. The breastplate is our defence against accusation.

c. the sandals of the Gospel. John Stott quotes one Johannes Blauw "Missionary work is like a pair of sandals that have been given to the church in order that it shall set out on the road and keep on going to make known the mystery of the gospel." The devil is concerned to keep the people of God on the defensive, taken up with warding him off, but we should be concerned to be on the offensive and so I link with the sandals, the sword mentioned in v17.....We are called to be sharers of the gospel, witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. In doing so we as it were take the battle to the enemy but we don't go empty handed. We have the weapon of the word of God, the Bible **d. the sword of the spirit.** As Christians we stand on the promises of God and we march forward with the gospel which "is the power of God for salvation" Rom 1:16. We are not just seeking to defend ourselves but to push back the darkness, to undermine the lies of the devil and to see prisoners of war set free.

e. the shield of faith. A shield that would stretch the whole length of the body. Here is described as deflecting the darts of the devil, the incendiary bombs of temptation, doubt, fear, anxiety etc.

How we as Christians hate temptation..... oh you little fibber we love it. When temptation comes we open our arms and our minds and welcome it. We play with it and toy with it and wonder shall I shan't I? And of course we do. That is not using the shield of faith. The point of the shield was to push away the flaming dart before it stuck into the person and caught fire.

We use faith, that is our trust in God and desire to do his will, to turn temptation aside so that we live the way he wants us to.

f. the helmet of salvation. Elsewhere Paul refers to the helmet as the hope of salvation and we know that whatever measure of salvation we have already received and experienced there is a future dimension to salvation. That dimension is important for death is one of the devil's greatest weapons. A weapon which the resurrection of Jesus Christ broke for ever and yet death and especially the fear of death are points of weakness for many Christians. It is hard to fight against an enemy you fear. So to us is given our helmet. A helmet which acts not just to bring us assurance in the present but to give us full assurance that the God who keeps and defends us here and now will do so at the end "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Tim 1:12). Thomas A Kempis wrote, "A man is blessed if he is able to keep the hour of his death continually before his eyes, and every day hold himself in readiness for death". That is to look straight down the barrel of our enemy with confidence in the hope of our salvation. We can press on in our Christian pilgrimage with confidence in this protection. The helmet of the hope of salvation gives us the assurance that "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Paul encourages to be strong in the Lord by using the armour the gifts he has given us of truth, righteousness, the gospel, the word of God, faith and hope to help us in the battle.

Daily we are encouraged to us these things to help us to stand and we do it v18 in prayer.

it is in prayer that the battle against the devil's schemes are often fought as we in prayer seek to repel temptation, to change our attitudes and to submit to the will of God. Prayer is both the putting on of the armour and the using of it. If we think of the temptation in the wilderness and the struggle in Gethsemane. Was not prayer the field of battle? The place where the fighting against the devil is actually done? But if prayer is the battle ground it is also the means of victory for it is the means of entering into or joining with the power of God. In prayer we bring the power of God into the situations for which we are concerned.

So to sum up. Paul wanted these early Christians to be strong. He knew the opposition against them and the schemes the devil would use to knock them down and destroy their faith he wanted them to firm and he shows them how through the armour and prayer.

What about us? Have you ever seen one of those figures with a round weighted base? You push it and it wobbles this way and that. Many Christians have metaphorical wobbly bottoms. It is not just the false doctrines that Paul mentions in 4.14 that might knock us about and cause us to wobble this way and that as Christians but the very attacks of the devil. God wants us to be stable. He provides the strength for us in his power and through his given armour. To stand firm against deception, accusation, temptation and doubt. We put on that armour through our relationship with God, through studying his word and through our life of prayer. Without ALL the armour we are vulnerable open to attack and even defeat. But in the armour and that is in the strength of Christ we can not only stand but we can see victory.