

This very familiar and descriptive passage gives us guidance on how we can live Godly lives in our spiritually challenging world.

It may help to know the context. Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians from prison to let them know that having been saved they should now begin to live distinctive lives.

In the chapters before our reading he urged all Christians to “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” (4:1) and in chapters 4-6 he spells out what is involved in achieving this by giving instructions on Christian living and for Christian households.

However, he knew that following all this advice would not be easy so he gave the whole armour of God passage to give the Ephesians the spiritual resources to do what would be needed.

We should note that the armour Paul tells us to put on is designed to help us stand our ground – it is not armour for aggressive action – but defensive, for protection. He really wants us to take this point on board as he emphasises this 4 times – take your stand, stand your ground, stand and stand firm. The armour is to empower believers to withstand the evils that surround and threaten them.

Paul also uses plural words for standing fast so we are not meant - or expected - to be doing this on our own but together.

But what are we standing against? Paul tells us it is “the rulers, authorities and powers of the dark world and the spiritual forces of evil”.

We could think Paul has overstated the danger – perhaps we underestimate the presence of evil in our midst.

But as I wrote this news reports have covered the double murder of an Archdeacon’s two daughters by a teenager who had made a pact with Satan to kill women in return for winning the lottery – and the forthcoming trial of a policeman charged with the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard. And then last week the senseless mass shooting in Plymouth.

Many Christians are uncomfortable referring to the devil as a person – but one of his most successful ploys is to persuade people that he doesn’t exist. The Bible portrays Satan as a person repeatedly, - a person with a clever mind, a malevolent heart, a wicked soul and a fierce determination to subvert our faith in and obedience to God. Satan is

powerful and very attractive, he has inspired evil in our world and will not be finally defeated until Christ comes again.

We need to be on guard at all times as he can creep up on us.

This is illustrated by CS Lewis in the Screwtape Letters – the experienced devil Screwtape is advising his young nephew Wormwood on how to prevent a young man becoming a Christian and says “the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts”.

Paul’s armour helps us deal with not only the world around us but also how to tackle the threats from within – in our hearts when we don’t think, behave or speak in the ways that we know we should as Christians.

Paul’s opening words in today’s passage are “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power”. We are to invite God to help us, to strengthen us, to empower us and to remember that God’s power far exceeds our need and is vaster than we can even imagine. Drawing on God’s strength we can do what he has called us to do.

Now let’s look at the armour Paul asks us to don - *(Image to show)* He talks about putting on the **whole** armour and the word “whole” is key. Partial armour would leave us dangerously vulnerable. If a Roman soldier left off his breastplate or his boots or his helmet – his enemies would immediately target the place where he had no protection.

The same is true of God’s armour – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. What would happen if we ignored one of these – truth for example – if we were known for all the other virtues but lacked truth what kind of person would we be – we would be compromised. Each part of the armour serves an important function and each piece is essential.

Also the order in which Paul describes each piece is the order in which a soldier would have put them on.

Firstly – the belt of Truth

The Roman soldier’s belt held together his loose tunic so that it didn’t get in the way during fighting. We need to have truth to protect us from the wiles of the devil – and there are different types of truth – you can be honest and truthful but also remember that Jesus described himself as The Truth. “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) and he promised “if you hold to my teachings then ...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8: 31-32).

Secondly – The breastplate of Righteousness

The breastplate covers the vital organs and would have stopped arrows, spears and sword blows. In the same way righteousness gives us protection. Jews thought of righteousness as being gained by following and adhering to the laws of the Torah. But for us as Christians through God's amazing grace we are covered with righteousness that we could never have earned.

Thirdly – our feet fitted with the gospel of Peace

Soldiers boots were essential and needed to be hard wearing. The gospel of peace gives us similar protection – it provides the footing and grounding for everything we do.

Fourthly – the shield of Faith *(2 images to show)*

The word used here for shield refers to a huge door-like shield wide enough and tall enough to protect most of the soldier's body. They would stand shoulder to shoulder and put these shields together in a tortoise like formation to present an impenetrable defence against the attacking enemy, with some held above their heads to extinguish and deflect flaming arrows.

In the same way our faith gains maximum value when we join together in fellowship with other Christians as a community of faith. The fiery darts we deflect - are temptations of various sorts.

Fifthly – the helmet of Salvation

The helmet protects the head – an essential piece of armour as a blow to the head is more likely to kill than a blow to the body. God's unconditional grace has saved us all, but Satan tries to strike a blow to our spiritual heads by causing us to doubt God and his total and unconditional forgiveness of us, to doubt that he answers our prayers, sowing endless seeds of discouragement and undermining our faith.

Finally – the sword of the spirit - the word of God

The sword was the main weapon for a foot soldier – our sword is the bible. Paul reminds us in his letter to Timothy that every scripture is God breathed and when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness he quoted scripture to refute each of the devil's temptations. In the same way we can use the word of God to defeat our temptations. But effectively using a sword takes practice. We need to regularly study the word so that we have its tools easily to hand when we need them. Practice makes perfect. In the same way that we should go to the gym or exercise regularly so we should be keeping ourselves spiritually healthy with regular study and reading of the word.

Paul ends our passage today with a reminder that standing firm and dressed in all this armour we should be praying at all times in all places in all ways for all God's people – see his emphasis on the word all. This means group prayer, intercessional prayer, individual prayer, silent prayer, walking prayer, shouting prayer – absolutely any type of prayer – just pray.

The emphasis is not on how to pray but to pray all the time and for all things.

So let's put on the **whole** armour of God – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God – and stand firm and pray.

Dear Lord

Help us

- to dress ourselves at all times and in all places with your full armour,
 - to stand firm in the knowledge and love of you
- and
- to pray in all ways and constantly for everything.

Amen

Carol Elsasser, 22 August 2021