



Soldiers of Christ, Arise

“Put on the whole armour of God”
Please read Ephesians 6 verses 10-20.

Introduction

The Ephesian epistle is regarded as one of the most highly doctrinal works in Christian literature, and was written about the year 60AD when Paul was in prison in Rome. When Paul was writing this epistle he often reflected on his past experiences and considered the problems of others with insight into his own. The main theme of the epistle is the purpose of God to bring all men into unity with Himself.

Broadly speaking the letter as it proceeds falls into four main sections – (1) New life in Christ; (2) New society created through Christ; (3) New standards expected with emphases on unity and purity; (4) New relationships into which God has brought us – peace and harmony amongst our fellow men and constant hostility to the devil.

Our reading falls into the last of these sections. When Paul was in prison it is generally thought that he often observed the armour of the soldiers who were guarding him and reflecting on this he eventually drew out a dramatic picture of the Christian life in military terms as expounded in these verses. This is indeed an appropriate illustration because as Christians we are described as being in the world but not of it. We are, as it were, swimming against the tide and treading the narrow way and pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3 verse 14).

The very word ‘conversion’ implies a complete turn around and, so as far as the world and its values are concerned, we are going in the opposite direction and therefore must inevitably expect opposition. The apostle here leaves us in no uncertainty about just how fierce and protracted the conflict will be for us from the time of our initial experience of salvation until our final entry into its perfect consummation.

In passing it might be worth noting that the formation of the Salvation Army by General Booth and the Church Army under William Carlisle was as a direct result of reading these verses. Three of our favourite hymns were also inspired by them – “Onward, Christian Soldiers” by Sabine Baring Gould, “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” by George Duffield and “Soldiers of Christ, Arise” by Charles Wesley. I am sure you are all familiar with these – as a church organist for the past number of years I have come across them

frequently. In all of them please notice that we are described as soldiers – a militant fighting people – and all of them express the apostle’s sentiments very thoroughly indeed.

Now I would like to look at these verses more closely, in which our Christian life is depicted in terms of a field of battle where we are the soldiers fighting to maintain the cause of Christ and His kingdom and to overthrow the power of our spiritual enemy.

We shall consider it from four main viewpoints.

1. The opposition to be faced

Although outwardly manifested in the deeds of men, our enemies are not principally the acumen of flesh and blood but, as Paul states, “the principalities and powers, rulers of darkness, spiritual wickedness in high places”. In other words, our struggle is not with human beings but with cosmic intelligences and demonic agents, and all the grim host of evil that lie unseen behind everything that opposes the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One has only to turn to the media or reflect on our world situation to see that these forces of evil are rampant in many parts of the world but – never despair – they are all vanquished powers. Through the death, resurrection and ascension of our blessed Lord Jesus all these sinister forces are firmly placed under His feet and through our faith-union with him we not only share His conquest but are more than able to measure up to this battle against them.

2. The equipment to be taken

Paul now lists six pieces of armour to be worn and, as we look at them individually, let us ask ourselves if we are constantly wearing them night and day.

(i) The belt of truth

The belt girt the Roman soldier’s tunic and from it his sword hung, thus giving freedom of movement. In fact, it was primarily necessary to hold the rest of his armour in place. Our whole Christian lives need to be held together with the solid truth of God’s word, and of how we stand before God and how we challenge the attacks of Satan. Our answer to all his buffetings is found in the scriptures, e.g. “if God be for us, who can be against us?” and “who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8 verses 31 to 35). It is worth remembering how Jesus himself challenged His own temptations likewise by saying “it is written” (Matt. 4).

(ii) The breastplate of righteousness

Although the righteousness of Christ, which is credited to us in the act of justification, is a pre-requisite, I believe what is referred to here is that personal righteousness implanted in us by the Holy Spirit in virtue of which our characters are conformed to that of our Lord. The breastplate was worn across the heart, the seat of our affections.

(iii) Feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace

Roman soldiers' heavy sandals were fitted with understuds to enable them to move quickly and also to tread over rough marshy ground unimpaired. This obviously implies our basic commission as the Lord's redeemed people to proclaim the Gospel to others and endeavour to win them for our master. For this purpose, we must not be content merely to attend a weekly meeting or share our testimony with casual visitors. Instead we must get out of the "carpet slipper brigade" and get our boots on and go out into enemy territory. This is where our real mission lies. Then also we must stand firm. Paul writes earlier in this Epistle, "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro ... with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4 verse 14). So let's stand firm on solid Gospel truth.

(iv) The shield of faith

This was a strong oblong shield made of heavy wood. One of the most dangerous weapons with which the Roman soldiers had to contend was the fiery dart – a missile which was set alight and hurled. However, this shield was adequately designed to deal with it. As soon as the missile made impact it sunk firmly into the thick shield and immediately the flame was extinguished. Satan the arch enemy of our souls is all-out to thwart us on our pathway to glory. When we are confronted with his fiery darts of disappointment, frustration, misfortune or subtle temptation, that is when we need to erect our shields and seek the Lord for refuge. God Himself in addressing Abraham said "Fear not ... I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen.15 verse 1).

(v) The helmet of salvation

This obviously means headwear but it is described here as a helmet of salvation. In our Lord Jesus Christ we have a sure and certain hope of salvation because the penalty has been paid at the infinite cost of His precious death on Calvary. Salvation however does not merely look back. It certainly involves the remission of past sins but, more than that, it implies strength to deal with and conquer all future attacks of sin, and many of these there will be because, even though redeemed, we still must contend with the old nature.

Also implied would be our cheerful acceptance of every joy, trial or other experience that the Lord may see fit to put us through, in the certain knowledge that He intended it to work out for our ultimate if not immediate benefit.

(vi) The sword of the spirit

This of course, as Paul says here directly, is the word of God. This last piece of armour is both offensive and defensive. We as Christians cannot defeat God's enemies or win His battle without a working knowledge of His book. Just for a moment, imagine a soldier today going to war unable to manipulate his weapons – it is inconceivable. So how can we as Christian soldiers engage properly in spiritual warfare if we cannot handle our swords? You remember that when God was communicating with Joshua when he succeeded Moses, He said to him, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Jos. 1 verse 8). Let me ask you therefore – how often is this precious book taken down from the shelf – every day and every night? It is widely recommended among professing Christians that they should start and end the day with the Lord around His word.

3. The resistance to be offered

Having examined the various pieces of armour in detail we now look at the battle itself and how to win it in the power of our Saviour. There are three major steps again appropriately described in terms of warfare.

Strategic retreat

"Be strong in the Lord" says our reading, implying that He is a shelter to hide in during time of danger. Some Christians try to escape from adversity rather than "take it to the Lord in prayer". Even in warfare there are times when fully armed fighters need to take shelter in the face of direct frontal attacks.

Unyielding defence

Three times in our reading the apostle says "stand". In other words, we must not give in. How can we thus stand and not surrender, when the going is rough? By taking and wearing our armour and realising that without it our own strength is nil. Only divine strength will suffice in these days.

All-out attack

This of course implies positive action on the part of every one of us. All who profess faith in Christ have a distinctly unique role to play in the ranks of our captain. So now let us get marching into action standing firmly on the promises of Christ and knowing assuredly that victory is ours through the cross.

4. The offensive to be sustained

This can be expressed in two separate words, "watch" and "pray". As we saw earlier, the devil is very cunning and highly organised so therefore we need to be on the alert.

The apostle Peter gives us good advice. He writes, "be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking

whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith” (1 Peter 5 verses 8 & 9). So there is a need for constant anticipation and aggressive action on our part and this leads on to prayer.

Since our victory depends on divine aid we must keep praying at all seasons. There has never been a time like the present when the Lord’s people need to pray.

Prayer must be constant not only in times of crises; it must also be intense even to the point of asking, seeking and knocking (Luke 11 verse 9). As Christians we must pray regularly for one another, for those engaged in mission at home or overseas and those in authority, and prayerfully seek openings to share our faith with others, offering them – as Christ’s ambassadors – the Lord’s terms of peace.

In this way the battle will be won, Christ’s triumph visibly demonstrated, Satan defeated and souls regenerated.

Conclusion

One very vital point is necessary to conclude. If you reflect on the six pieces of armour mentioned you would see there is no protection offered for the back. This may seem insignificant but I don’t think so. To turn back where there is no armour for protection is to become easy prey to Satan. “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” says Jesus (Luke 9 verse 62). Some render the word “finally” at the beginning of our reading as “henceforth”, indicating that the interim period between our Lord’s two advents is to be characterized by this continuous conflict, terminating only when the peace of heaven is obtained.

Put on the whole armour of God – watch and pray. Against these the powers of darkness are helpless.