

STANDING FIRM

Ephesians 6:10-20

Paul turns from his consideration of what the Christian life might look like in the light of the Gospel of reconciliation and the unity won for us in Christ. As he brings his letter to a conclusion he addresses the problem of how to live this life in a hostile environment. The passage is a great favourite of many, describing the ‘whole armour of God’. Many sermons have been preached and many books written on this armour, pointing out the details and Old Testament background of Paul’s use of the familiar figure of a Roman soldier as an illustration of the Christian as a spiritual warrior.

Before turning to the wider issues raised here I just want to draw your attention to something that often seems to be missed or passed over. Ephesians is a letter about unity, about standing firm together. When reading this passage we often turn it into a description of the individual Christian, but two things should remind us that Paul is talking to a group of believers. Firstly, Roman soldiers never went into battle or patrol on their own. The Roman army was famous for its ability to work together, to support one another and protect the soldier next to you. Paul doesn’t explicitly mention this but it would be part of the image conjured up in the minds of his first readers. Secondly, one thing Paul does say that may be lost in translation is that putting on and using this armour is a joint venture. Just about every verb he uses, and all the pronouns, are plural – *all of you* be strong, *all of you* put on the armour, *all of you* may be able to stand, *all of you* struggle, *all of you* take up the armour of God – and so on. Paul is not describing an individual soldier but a platoon. This not only fits with Paul’s overall message to the Ephesians, but also with the whole tenor of the New Testament, and indeed the whole Bible, which knows nothing of the

individual Christian. Christians are always part of a wider group. Even Paul, called to a very specific mission, works with others and recognises his need for the support of others, as shown here by his request for prayer.

The command to ‘be strong in the Lord’ presumes that God is eager and willing to provide strength and that any lack of strength results from our neglect. It assumes also that empowering is not automatic, but comes as we seek a closer relation with Christ. It is a choice we make about the relative importance of life with Christ.

This command also assumes that we need strength. For all its joys, life is hard and full of difficulties, challenges, and traps. Some of these come from illness and death, some from what other people do, some from our own action and some from spiritual forces. Whatever the circumstance, however, life in Christ requires our entire being. Both the standard and the challenge are lofty, but so is the help. The strength supplied is the strength of God’s own Spirit.

If you looking for a religion to make you comfortable, Christianity is not for you. This is no religion for the weak or the lazy. Passive Christians cannot do the will of God; the very label ‘passive Christian’ is an oxymoron. A battle is going on and we do not live on neutral turf. We either live for God or against him. The choices we make either reflect God’s character or the character of sin.

For many of us, this means our goal is wrong. We seek a carefree life. It does not exist. Our conceptions of life and especially of retirement must change. Christians are not called to tranquillity. We are called to peace, yes, but peace in the midst of struggle. This peace does not render us inactive; it makes us ready to do God’s will.

The ability to be strong and to be ready depends on one thing— an awareness of two realities, the reality of this world and the reality ‘in the heavenly realms’ of life with God in Christ. Most of us are aware only of the one, material world. We are determined by its definitions, interests, and forces. Awareness of the reality of God gives perspective

from which to assess this world and to know that it does not measure up, that evil is present, and that change is required. To be determined by God, his definitions, and his Spirit is to be made strong and ready. These verses ask, “In which reality will you live?” and calls us to take a stand against the evil of this world and to be like God. That is the purpose of the gospel. The gospel as both gift and challenge, strengthens and makes ready.

Maybe it does not need to be said, but too often the church has misunderstood its metaphors of battle as license for violence. Our battles are carried out by standing firm against enticements to evil, not by destroying people. The statement in 12 is important: Our struggle is not with humans; they are not the enemy. To do evil to people does not fit with the Christian faith. We may not suddenly forget tolerant love, patience, and peace when we encounter people doing wrong. We still are defined by and armed with truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, and the gospel, not arrogance, ill-will, slander, and anger. The way we carry on our battles is eloquent witness to our faith.

Obviously such comments have direct relevance for the way Christians respond in arguments over social issues like marriage, abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality. If we act in unchristian ways in rejecting such things, what have we become? Evil cannot be used to achieve good. An ancient Jew put it well: “The person trying to do right by violence is like a eunuch desiring to seduce a young woman.” (Ecclesiasticus 20:4) Whether absolute pacifism is an option in a sinful world is debatable, but that Christians must be people of peace is not. The church’s history is littered with painful and atrocious violations of its own gospel, let’s make sure we do not continue such a bleak history.

Amen.

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