



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The sword of the spirit

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Ephesians 6:10–17

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

This evening I want to talk to you about the Whole Armour of God, which we find in Ephesians 6—and particularly focus on thoughts which relate to the Sword of the Spirit.

This well-known passage brings the whole of the Epistle to the Ephesians to a close—or, more properly, a conclusion—picking up main themes in the letter and weaving them together into an inspiring final exhortation. It puts Christian living against a backcloth of conflict.

- It should be said that there are dangers in the analogy of warfare ... and today no-one needs to be reminded of this
- I will take this focus, but keep reminding us of the bigger picture, which is 'the whole armour'.

Paul wrote from captivity (more than likely house arrest) and 3:1 and 4:1 would seem to point that way. Therefore, he would have been familiar with the spectacle of soldiers marching or keeping guard. The writer uses the visual to move to the deeper ... a practical spiritual approach.

Ephesians 6:17

"... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

It would be less than accurate to simply translate our understanding of 'the word of God' here as simply 'Bible'—but rather the word that God gives us to speak which, whilst directly related to Scripture, is far more encompassing!

We remind ourselves of the gospels where we see Jesus on many occasions speaking to large crowds. On one such occasion, he gives warnings and encouragement regarding the need to acknowledge God before others. There is the promise of what would happen when the disciples are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities. It is interesting that this comes in the context of Jesus sending out the twelve disciples. They are instructed:

- not to be anxious
- not to be concerned about how to defend themselves
- to be assured that God himself will give them the words they need, when they are confronted with opposition.

This picture is clear in Matthew 10:17–20. God empowers not only the disciples, but all of us who have to face challenges in life.

The Armour of God is given to Christians so that we may be able to stand in the light of the opposition that we have to face and struggle with. The outer clothing of the Christian is described as armour—the belt, breastplate, sandals, shield, helmet and the sword. The purpose of investing ourselves with God-given armour is a threefold emphasis on stability:

- v.10—be strong in the Lord
- v.13—be able to stand your ground
- v.14—stand firm, then

We live in a world where we must be ready to make our witness and stand our ground ... and the Sword of the Spirit is a vital component of what it means to do this. We recognise that:

The sword of the spirit is distinct from the rest of the armour

The sixth and last piece of the armour is the ‘sword’ and is the only one which can be thought of as offensive, as well as defensive. The God who puts this word in our hands does so—so that we might:

- resist temptation, as Jesus did with scripture
- in our evangelism, seek to make a confident witness.

Every active Christian who takes hold of the ‘sword of the spirit’ knows why the writer to the Hebrews described God’s word as ‘sharper than any two-edged sword’.

There are some clear dangers we keep in mind in using what could be perceived as an offensive action:

- we think of historical issues—and how people exported empires and imposed their power on others
- we remember the Christianising of political and ideological systems.

Having established this, there remain some helpful issues to be examined:

- The need to regain confidence in Christian witness
- The need to be proactive, as well as reactive
- The sword is ‘given’ and so it is God’s way of actively engaging with conflict
- It helps to dispel doubt and inflicts wounds upon evil

The challenge of evil is all around us. Earlier this year a relatively young Scotsman, Andy Murray, followed his victory in the USA by winning the Wimbledon Tennis Championship. What is not known by some is that he comes from Dunblane.

The small town of Dunblane in Scotland will never be the same. At about 9.25 am on March 13, 1996, Thomas Hamilton, known by some as “Mr Creepy”, walked into the Dunblane

primary school's kindergarten class and opened fire. Sixteen children and their teacher were killed; twelve more were wounded.

Beyond theological and philosophical explanations, the problem of evil persists. However manifested, it remains mysterious and heartbreaking. The old question of justice resurfaces again and again. Why must the innocent suffer?

Ron Taylor, headmaster of the school where the massacre occurred, summarised the tragedy in these words: "Evil visited us yesterday, and we don't know why. We don't understand it and never will."

Very often, it is not so much evil in itself that we have to handle, but those things which have very bad outcomes in people's lives:

- I was one of a group of leaders that opposed gambling proposals in relation to a new casino in the North-West of England. Many of those involved (though not everyone) came from the Christian community. We need to be alert today with regard to the dream of a Packer empire built on gambling. It is risky for us to say it, but we will say it! ... that any community which is substantially built upon gambling is built on a foundation that is less than moral.
- There are many times in ministry when we find ourselves having to stand up for the Christian community and its relationship with the local issues—and it has often been church folk who have found themselves disturbed, but would rather remain silent.

With an up-coming Federal Election, we don't have the option of remaining silent about issues that really matter to us. We must speak out with clarity, even if it is unpopular.

So as I look at this 'standing against the enemy of wrong', the injunction to 'be strong in the Lord' picks up the theme of power in Chapters 1–3.

- Pray for God's resurrection power to be known (1:19f)
- God's power raised Jesus to a position of authority over all powers (2:6)
- Our prayer is to know his power within (3:16)

We see a link forged between the inner-power of Chapters 1–3 ... and the life we must live out as in Chapters 4–6.

One writer on Ephesians put it this way—"We will be able to preserve our unity, control our speech, live lives of purity in a corrupt world, sacrifice ourselves in love for each other as Jesus did for us, and be filled with the Spirit in our worship. Our family lives will be transformed. But none of this will happen, unless the resurrecting power of God Himself is an every-day reality for us."

The sword of the spirit involves close personal encounter

Not only is the 'sword' capable of offensive action, it is of a particular kind. The word used is 'machaira' which is a short sword envisaging close personal activity.

- In the realm of personal discipleship—temptation
- In the realm of day-to-day living and in the arena of ideas
- In the realm of authentic Christian lifestyle

The sword— 'short, two-edged-cut and thrust sword'—was wielded by the heavily armed legionary and could be considered small in comparison to its total impact.

- Our personal witness may be small, but it can be powerfully effective
- Let us not underestimate the importance of retaining the centrality of scripture as the guide and focus of our world view
- We are called to rediscover the place of being a living witness, invariably in a context of conflict
- Our complacency is always disturbed ... as is our reliance upon our own ability to deal with contemporary challenges to the Christian way ... this is always undertaken in God!

In the midst of an Ashes series, in an Olympic tournament or in a major rugby competition ... concentration really matters to a sportsman or woman. The focus has to be clear and detailed. There are many ways in which our discipleship needs to be exercised with similar intent.

We cannot live the Christian life without a specific focus on Jesus Christ and we often face the enemy of deception (v.11). We notice:

- the cunning plans designed to deceive us
- the fall into sin and disunity.

Paul gives an example of the scheme in an earlier section (4:26–27):

- Feeding feelings of anger, which lead to disunity
- Christian churches need each other. We ought to speak together on the issues that concern us deeply as a community ... and it doesn't happen easily.

I am sure the image of the close personal encounter should make us ask questions about the strength of what we are dealing with. We reflect upon v.12 and it seems to me that Paul is not describing different kinds of demonic power with each phrase; he is just piling up names and descriptions—four in fact—getting longer and more horrifying. We would sooner chunter about each other and complain within the four walls of the church, rather than engage with the larger picture and the greater enemies!

- This is a time for the churches to pull together
- This reaches across the barriers of gender, age and approach.

I highlight the fact that many of us are struggling to find appropriate political leadership ... and we have never needed it more!

- I have alerted you as a congregation to the fact that we have 'rushed to the bottom' in defining our views of those seeking help in Australia
- We have knowingly cut back our aid to poorer countries who need our assistance
- We have allowed some of the most disadvantaged in our community to be ignored amidst much political rhetoric.

While commenting on the cyclical nature of history since World War II, Elie Wiesel, the Romanian-born Jewish professor and political activist, Holocaust survivor and 1986 Nobel Peace prize recipient, said, "After the war we were all very optimistic, thinking that racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry, fanaticism would never happen again. And here we are, 50 years later, and racism is still here, war is still here in many areas of the world, and fanaticism is on the rise. So wherever we turn, we realize that good and evil are still irreconcilable."

The Sword of the Spirit reminds us that a close personal encounter with God is required, if we are going to engage in the battles that clearly confront us.

The sword of the spirit will empower Christian living today

Let us then remind ourselves of the bigger picture, against which the Epistle is written. Paul, and others in the early days of Christian witness, knew what it meant to have human foes. One writer put it this way—“He was involved in enough physical resistance to his work to qualify him for the proverbial cat with nine lives.” You only have to read the extensive catalogue of calamities that Paul had to face in 2 Corinthians 11.

- Stoning, scourging, shipwrecks and much else
- Every small battle was actually part of a larger conflict
- For Paul there is a cosmic conflict ... “principalities and powers”.

We are given God’s armour and it is to be worn—not simply to be admired. The Roman armour of the guard outside Paul’s place of captivity may have looked like the last word in armaments, but the wearer was naked compared to the woman or man who takes up God’s armour. We need to engage with the issues and enemies of the Christian way ... but we do it in a way that honours Christ.

- The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, but it is always a word of peace
- The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God and is always a word of profound relevance
- The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God and it is a word which points the way

So there you have it ... Paul’s equipment for living the Christian life, if we are to stand at the last. Charles Wesley put it so well:

Stand then in his great might,
With all his strength endued;
But take, to arm you for the fight,
The panoply of God.
That, having all things done,
And all your conflicts past,
You may o’ercome through Christ alone,
And stand entire at last.

Frank Thielman draws our attention to the fact that the attack takes place at a particular time: ‘the evil day’. Paul had used a similar phrase in 5:16, but there, because of the use of the plural, it is clear that he is talking about recurring evils. The singular and definite form in the final chapter has led scholars to understand it in a wide variety of ways:

- In relation to the everyday difficulties of living as a marginalised Christian in a contrary culture
- Particular difficulties that arise in relation to an individual’s daily experience
- The final intense battle prior to the ultimate victory of God
- The final day of evil, which the author of Ephesians believes is now present, but not yet in all its fullness.

This last take is probably the most accurate. What we are experiencing now is a taste of how things will continue to be, but we must rise to the challenge with confidence and believe that God can bring us his way of ultimate victory through Christ.

There are many things we may wish we could change about the world in which we live, but that option is not offered to us.

A Canadian family was sitting at the table discussing current affairs, as they often did. On Monday night, 30 October, 1995, the conversation was about Quebec's unsuccessful effort to secede from Canada.

As the parents vigorously debated this hot issue, the youngest boy asked his father, "If Quebec leaves Canada, where will it go?"

We are called to be Christian people where we are ... there is no alternative!