

Stand Firm

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[0 : 00] On Saturday, the 3rd of September 1939, at 11.15am, Neville Chamberlain famously announced!

from the cabinet room of 10 Downing Street, this country is at war.

A short sentence that transformed Britain in a moment. Within just a few days, one and a half million people were evacuated from cities across the country.

Gas masks were widely distributed. All places of entertainment were closed. Blackout regulations were strictly enforced. Air raid sirens were ready.

The military was mobilized. As soon as a state of war was declared, the nation did all it could to ensure it was ready.

[1 : 11] Ready to stand firm against the inevitable attacks that would come. When we are at war, we make sure, don't we, that we are ready so that we can stand firm when facing an enemy.

As we come to the end of the book of Ephesians this morning, we arrive at, I think, what is almost certainly the most famous passage in this book. But before we start thinking about the famous armor, I think we need to take a step back for a moment and think quite simply about why we need armor in the first place.

Assuming Paul doesn't have a fancy dress party in mind, why would he think the church needs armor? The answer is obvious, isn't it?

Brothers and sisters, this church is at war. And so, Paul says, be ready to stand firm.

We're going to see three things this morning that equip us and ready us for this war, that we too may stand firm. Seeing, first of all, that we need strength for the battle.

[2 : 41] First point there this morning in verses 10 to 12. I don't know if you're familiar with the Screwtape Letters. It was a book written by the famous Christian author, C.S. Lewis, in which he sort of satirically imagines a senior demon writing to a junior demon.

And so, the senior demon is writing letters throughout the book, offering advice to his junior in order to help him draw a Christian away from God. The book is full of little nuggets of gold.

But right at the beginning, in the sort of preface, Lewis writes that there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils.

One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

They say, don't they, that knowing your enemy is half the battle. Maybe that's true, but worse than not knowing your enemy is not believing your enemy exists.

[3 : 56] Rory, our eldest son, is almost two now. And he's at the stage where he loves to play hide and seek. But he's also at the stage where he is absolutely terrible at hide and seek.

Right, so, in Rory's world, if he can't see me, he thinks I'm not there. And that he is safe.

So, he'll sort of, he'll stand in the corner of the room and just cover his eyes and look down and go, hiding. Right, this morning, he was lying on the sofa next to me with his legs on me and he put his face in a cushion.

Hiding. It's funny, isn't it? Because it's harmless. It's safe to say I'm undefeated so far. What's not harmless is I think that's how some Christians think about spiritual warfare.

Perhaps particularly in our materialist world, if I can't see the enemy, then he must not be there. He is there.

[5 : 11] He is there. And he is why we need armor. Look there with me at verse 11 and 12. Put on the whole armor of God, Paul writes, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We really are in a war.

And there really is an enemy. Even if you can't see them, they are no less present. And that enemy longs, longs to see the church of Christ crumble.

We learn three things, I think, in these couple of verses about the nature of the enemy we face.

First, they are powerful.

[6 : 47] Rulers and authorities, cosmic powers. This is no joke. Secondly, they are evil.

These are the powers that rule over this present darkness. These are the spiritual forces of evil.

And thirdly, they are cunning.

The devil schemes against us, right? He has no interest in waging war honorably. He doesn't care about fighting fair. He is crafty and cunning, deceitful and dangerous.

Spiritual powers in the heavenly places, genuine evil and wickedness, cunning and deceitful schemes. That is the enemy we face. And I think we can get a pretty good idea of what he wants to do if we just look back over the letters of the Ephesians so far.

Because we have seen, haven't we, over the past couple of months, how wonderful the church is. How precious it is in God's sight.

[7 : 58] How central it is to his eternal purposes. How it is becoming ever more glorious as it grows in him to manifest the wisdom of God.

But this building, this temple of God, is not going up unopposed. Because the church is what God treasures, it is what the devil will seek to destroy.

And our enemy will seek to carry that out, I think, by inhibiting everything that Paul has been commending. The church, we saw at the start of chapter 4, didn't we, is to be built up in unity.

What do you think the enemy of the church will try and do? Sowing seeds of disunity, trying to turn one member of the church against another. The devil will delight in division amongst us.

We've seen as well, haven't we, that the church should be maturing in its faith. That is the primary means of growth that Paul is focused on in this letter, isn't it? Not growing in numbers, but more maturity.

[9 : 14] So expect enemy forces to try and pull us away from our Bibles. Expect to be tempted away from church. They want to keep us from maturing in our faith so that we would be unstable, ruthless, and vulnerable.

We've seen that the church is to speak what is good, speak the truth in love, to say only what is good for building up. Wicked powers are willing us to gossip about one another and grumble about fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord.

We saw in chapter 5 that the church is to put away all sexual immorality. Where do you think cosmic powers are going to concentrate their efforts?

They are cheering on when people give in to temptation because they are tearing down the church. There is an enemy.

They are real. They are powerful. They are evil. They are cunning. They are waging war against the church.

[10 : 32] And so they are waging war against us. You and me, right here this morning. And you might wonder, what hope do we have?

And the answer is none. If we depend on our own strength. If you think you can resist this enemy through sheer willpower, you are either fearfully underestimating what we are facing or grossly overestimating your own strength.

Probably both. We have no hope in our own strength. But we are not alone. Verse 10, Paul says, Let us finally be strong in the Lord.

And in the strength of His might. We are small, but God is great.

We are weak, but He is strong. Paul does not want us to kind of supplement our strength with a bit of God's strength.

[11 : 56] He wants Him to be our strength. To go in the strength of God, who is able, as we've seen in Ephesians, to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

To go in the same strength that raised Jesus Christ from the dead and raised Him where? Far above. Every ruler and authority and power and dominion.

The power of the devil and his armies should frighten us to the point of terror if we stand in our own strength. But we need not fear.

We need not fear if the Lord is our strength. For His strength is infinitely greater. God and God alone is where we find strength for this battle.

And that, I think, completely shapes our understanding of what comes next, as Paul calls us to put on the whole armor of God.

[13:04] So let's move on now to our second point this morning. Having seen where we receive strength for the battle, let us now consider the protection for the body. Because that is what armor is, isn't it?

Armor is what you put on in order to protect the body underneath. And if you've been with us over the past couple of months, I hope you're starting to piece together, right, what's going on here. The body in Ephesians is not your body or my body, is it? The body in Ephesians is the whole church united in Christ. In the Roman army of this time, where they're kind of, you know, their famous square shields, when they went into battle, they would, more often than not, they would go and form a shield wall.

And in a shield wall, right, every individual soldier, with their shield sort of in their left arm, would protect a part of themselves, but also the soldier on their left, trusting the soldier on their right to do the same for them.

As soon as someone just looked after number one at the expense of others, there was a gap. There was a hole in the armor, which had a very real potential to be deadly.

[14:30] Not just for the individual, but for the whole legion. A breach in the defense caused by someone's selfishness was costly for everyone.

I don't think that's just a kind of fitting historical illustration. It is, I think, safe to assume exactly the picture that Paul knew the Ephesian audience would have in mind as soon as armor was mentioned.

Right? Armor in their world meant the Roman army. And it was never just about protecting the individual, it was about protecting the whole unit.

Unity, standing side by side, protecting not only ourselves, but one another. This armor is not given to us as individuals just to protect ourselves from spiritual attack.

That is part of it. But it is given to the whole church together so that the whole body of Christ would be protected and stand firm. And in order to protect the whole body, right, you need all the armor.

[15:50] Just look at what he says there in verse 11 and 13. Put on the whole armor of God. Take up the whole armor of God. Right? This isn't a kind of pick and mix that's coming up.

It's not that you can just choose the bits you like to look of and leave behind the rest. Nor is it like a toolbox where you whip out what you need in a moment. As if you can anticipate exactly where the enemy's going to attack and strap on what we need for that day.

Right? Cunning enemies don't forecast their attacks, do they? They will attack wherever there is a weak spot. Wherever they see a chink in the armor, that is where the arrows will come flying in.

It's no good, is it, walking into a battlefield with a breastplate on and a shield in hand. But then requesting there be no headshots because you left your helmet at home. That's not how war works. And that's certainly not how this enemy fights. We need it all. The whole armor of God we must put on.

[16:57] And so when we come to each piece, as we'll do in just a moment, we're not supposed to be thinking, you know, some pieces here are more important than others. This is a single, united, indivisible set of armor.

So what is it made up of? Six items Paul mentions. The belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. The shoes of the gospel of peace.

The shield of faith. The helmet of salvation. And the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. Now first, that's the most obvious thing to say, isn't it?

We are fighting spiritual forces. And so we need spiritual armor. Don't make the mistake again of thinking, because you can't see it, it isn't there.

Or it doesn't matter. And each piece of this armor helps us in all sorts of ways. The devil is a deceiver.

[18:03] We learn that right from the beginning of the Bible. Genesis chapter 3. The devil loves to deceive. The belt of truth will help us see his lies for what they are.

He lies. He is cunning. And he will tell us, the church, all sorts of lies, in order to set us against one another and against God. Wouldn't life be better if, it won't be that bad if you do this.

Lies, lies, lies, against which we need the belt of truth to stand firm. The breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness.

Doing what is right and good and just. When cosmic powers of evil tempt us to do what we know to be selfish and sinful. The readiness of the gospel of peace.

That we might stand firm when turbulent trials are thrown against us. Let me just remind you of what Stuart read for us earlier from 1 Peter. Peter writes there, The devil prowls around looking for someone to devour and using suffering as a weapon against the church.

[19 : 40] If we are not equipped with the gospel of peace when we suffer, we will likely give in or give up in the face of fiery trials. The shield of faith Paul specifically gives is the means by which we can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.

Faith is our trust in God. Just think for a moment. I mean, whenever you're making a big decision in life and different people are giving you different advice about what to do, how do you figure out who the best person to listen to is?

We don't do, kind of take a vote and see whatever comes out on top. We listen to the people we trust most. The people we are certain know us best and want the best thing for us.

That's who we trust and that's who we listen to. Faith is what we do when we fully trust God and take the sting out of the evils when attacks, knowing that whatever he says, however good or tempting it might sound, it is God who knows us.

It is God who loves us. It is God who made us and cares for us and gave himself for us and so it is him.

[21 : 08] It is him that we will listen to. Fifthly, the helmet of salvation, the devil is not only a deceiver, he is an accuser. He will do what he can to make known our failings and our unworthiness, trying to bring us to our knees.

But we bear the helmet of salvation, knowing that the sin has been atoned for. Christ has set us free, knowing that there is no condemnation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And then finally, that the sword, the spirit, the word of God, precisely the weapon, isn't it, that we see Jesus himself using to ward off the devil's attacks during his 40 days in the wilderness.

Wielding the word of God doesn't just sort of mean that if we do our quiet time in the morning we'll be safe. It's of course a good thing to do, but it's not like an apple a day that keeps the doctor away. It is a weapon sharper than a double-edged sword that we should at all times be able and ready to wield and use through the spirit just as Jesus did.

[22 : 32] And the more we know it and love it, the more ready we will be for the fight. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God.

All good, all great. But how do we actually put it on? Well, remember, this is God's armor.

It's not just kind of the outfit that God recommends. It is his armor. We read in Isaiah 59 of God taking up the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness, exactly what we have in Ephesians 6.

We don't have to conjure up this armor ourselves or try and make it by our own strength. It is armor that God gives to us. Right?

The armor that we are to use, God has already put in place. We do not stand firm in order to receive the armor. We can stand firm because God has given us the armor. We just need to use it.

[23 : 51] We stand because we are confident of what God has done, not because of our confidence in us doing what God requires. So we should not be saying, Satan cannot touch me because of how righteous and faithful I have been this week.

Rather, we should be saying, I am protected by the truth that though I am weak, God is strong. This is his armor. I am safe because though I would fall where I to stand on my own, I stand instead in Christ's righteousness.

I can withstand the fiery arrows because I have peace with my God who has provided the faith I could not conjure, who has granted the salvation I could not earn, who has given the spirit I need every day to put on the armor of God is to turn to the Lord and say, I can't do it on my own.

I need you. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

that is the means by which we will stand firm as a church and it is the only means by which we will stand firm.

[25 : 23] If we trust in ourselves, this body of Christ will crumble. But go in the Lord's strength and we will continue to be built up.

And because it is all, isn't it, it is all about dependence on God. That I think is why Paul brings it all together with prayer.

Not as a seventh item but something that is under and over it all. Because prayer, isn't it, is what we do when we know we need God's help and cannot do it on our own.

That should be a constant state for us, praying at all times in the spirits so that this body of Christ might be protected from an enemy who wants to see us fall.

So Paul tells us of the protection we need for the body. Standing firm in the strength of the Lord. But he ends this letter with encouragement for the heart.

[26 : 35] Let's just look briefly at those last few verses as we come to the end of this wonderful letter. The last few verses of most of Paul's letters I think is one of those sections we can be tempted just to kind of gloss over it because it just seems like the kind of customary pleasantries, doesn't it?

It's like that bit at the end of an email where, you know, it tells you sort of the sender's name, their company, their job title and the logo. You know, I mean, the bit that nobody reads, right? The bit that they didn't even write themselves, it just appeared when they hit the send button.

I think we can often see these parts of Paul's letters just like those email signatures. It's just stuck on to the end of everything he writes and it doesn't really matter if we read it, but look a little closer.

Right, look a little closer and you'll see that's not the case. It follows the pattern of how Paul would end a letter, but it is also very clearly written to and for the Ephesian church.

See that actually, just turn with me back to chapter three and look at what Paul writes there in verse 13. Now, off the back of sort of everything he's said so far, he says, chapter three, verse 13, so I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

[28 : 04] This is part of Paul's whole motivation in writing this letter. Paul was in a war and the Ephesian church were worried he was losing because he was physically in chains.

And so Paul writes this letter to explain the true nature of the church and the true nature of her enemies so that the Ephesians would not lose heart for what he was suffering.

Flip back to the end of chapter six there. Verse 21, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother, right, the beloved brother, part of the new family of God in Christ and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything.

I have sent him to you for this very purpose that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts. There was no immediate major crisis in the Ephesian church, right, there was no kind of wild false teaching, they weren't adding anything onto the gospel, they weren't living the lives of legalists, but they needed their hearts encouraged.

Do we not need our hearts encouraged to? In a world where perhaps it does seem like the church is being swamped over by the powers of this world, everything Paul has said in this letter has been to encourage them to stand firm and keep going.

[29 : 58] And that is the same reason he attaches these last few words, do not lose heart brothers and sisters. Even if it looks like the church is in a losing battle, keep on going, strong in the Lord.

And then finally there, verse 23 and 24, Paul sends them on with the peace, grace and love of God. Again, not just a kind of Christian cliché, but an anchor thrown back into everything we've seen in this letter.

Peace that we have because of the reconciliation with God and one another as the new family in Christ. Grace that we rejoice in because it is the means by which he brought about this new family, giving us who were once dead in our sins and trespasses what we did not deserve.

Love that we know is the reason for God's choosing and saving his people, the love by which we were redeemed, the love we now are rooted in in Christ, the love by which we build up the church in love.

We have the peace, grace and love of our gods with us as we go into battle in his armor.

[31 : 15] God's love. As we go into wars seeking to protect the body in order that we might build up the church, remember brothers and sisters, we do not go alone.

We stand side by side with one another, with the whole family of Christ who are all fighting the same good fight and we go in the strength of God's grace, love and peace.
So do not lose heart, but keep going and keep growing. let us pray together as we close. Father, we thank you and praise you that you give us all that we need.
Lord, help us not to go in our own strength, but to go in the strength of you, putting on your armor, that we might protect the body of Christ and continue to build up his church for his glory.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, we're going to close by singing, O Church Arise. So please do stand if you're able as we sing to God's praise together.
[32 : 45] Amen.