

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 26th July 2020 – “The whole armour of God”

Introduction

Good morning, and welcome to this Podcast from Chalmers Memorial Church, Port Seton. My name is Tom Gordon, and I'm a member of Chalmers Church. Robin Allison, our minister, is having a well-earned break for a couple of weeks. He'll not be sunning himself with Julia on the beaches of Benidorm, I reckon. He could be in the manse indulging in the last of the *James Bond* movies or another box-set of *Super Hero* epics. But I suspect he's just chilling out with family. So, until he returns from a much-needed vacation, you'll have to make do with me.

Robin, as you know, shared a series on prayer with us in these Podcasts in recent weeks. And given that I knew I'd be sharing worship with you for two weeks in July, I decided to offer you a mini-series based on two visual images, word pictures, to help us explore aspects of our faith and church life.

Last week, we looked at the cloud that enshrouded the Ark of the Covenant as a visible sign of God's presence, the holiness of God, the promise of God's everlasting nearness day by day. But it was also a cloud that moved on, because of God's desire that his people stay focussed on pilgrimage and not settlement. Day by day, they were called to new things.

Today, I'm going to the New Testament for our visual image, and you might like to have your bibles ready at Paul's letter to the Ephesians and at chapter 6 for the reading – and the image – which will be shared with you later as a guide to our time of reflection.

But for now, we have a time of prayer. So, let us pray.

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Living God, even at home we are on a journey: a journey of faith and learning; a journey of sharing and building community; a journey of challenge and uncertainty; a journey of thoughtfulness and wonder. You prompt us to keep moving, and you promise us your presence. You call us to obedience, and you comfort us in our distress. You lead us into newness of life, and you love us beyond our imagining.

God of our pilgrim journey, we bring you our thanks and praise.

But you also call us to pause on our travels: to set down our Ark of the Covenant; to be aware of your holy presence; to be embraced by your love; to find the warmth of your acceptance and the reassurance of your closeness.

So that's what we do now. We pause. We rest. We ponder. We pray. We seek restoration. We worship you with all the thankfulness we can find.

Bless us in our restfulness as you have blessed us on our travelling. Bless us in our thoughtfulness as you have blessed us in our busyness. Bless us in our homes as you have blessed us in our church. Bless us in our separation as you have blessed us in our community. Bless us in your love now as you have blessed us in your love every step of the way, every setting down and beginning again, every day of rest and hour of weary travelling. Bless us ... for we need to be blessed.

And now, wherever we are, we say the prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, for ever. Amen

Bible Reading – Ephesians 6:10-20

Listen to our reading now. It's from the New Testament, from the Letter to the Ephesians, beginning at verse 10 of chapter 6. The Letter to the Ephesians is one of the many letters St Paul wrote on his missionary journeys, to help strengthen the fledgling Christian Church and to encourage everyone in their faith.

The late Professor William Barclay suggests that this letter ranks very high in the devotional and theological literature of the Christian Church. It's been called "The Queen of Epistles", he tells us, and reminds us that it was the book John Knox most often requested to be read to him very near the end of his life, and that Coleridge, the great poet and philosopher, said that Ephesians was "the divinest composition of man". High praise indeed.

You might think, therefore, that with such high-blown praise, we should approach this letter with apprehension, believing it to be beyond the likes of us. But not so. And our reading today is one of the reasons why, because it's a terrific visual image. I'll tease that out in a little while. But for now, let's look at this passage, which I've invited George Smith to read for us today.

Reading (by George Smith)

The Bible Reading this morning is taken from the New Testament, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, reading verses 10 to 20. Ephesians 6 and at verse 10. Let's listen for the Word of God.

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour 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 armour 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. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

We give thanks to God for this reading from his Word, and to his name we give glory and praise. Amen

Reflection

Thank you, George.

I'm not sure whether I've ever told you this, but when I was younger, I was a qualified Football Referee. I never reached beyond schools, Boys Brigade or Youth Club games, but I loved it – and even got to referee an under-fourteen final at the Edinburgh City Ground.

Now, it's a great Pub Quiz question when we turn to what a referee needs to be kitted out with before he – or she – takes to the field. Properly dressed for the occasion, of course, in a kit that's distinguishable from the colours of both teams – and the goalkeepers. That's written in "The Laws of Association Football" and is fairly obvious. It would be an awful thing if the referee was dressed in the same kit as one of the teams ...

But what does the referee have to carry? There are **eight** things in all. Do you know what they are? Well, I'm sorry I can't make it "answers on a postcard" time, so, I'll just tell you. A referee needs a) a whistle; b) a notebook; c) a yellow card; d) a red card; e) a pencil; f) a watch; g) a coin for the toss; and ... h) a ball!

Did you get them? No prizes, I'm afraid, but perhaps I've helped you with your next pub quiz. Nowadays, referees have foam-cans to spray the pitch for the ten-yard rule

at free-kicks and a head-set to communicate with the assistant referees. But not in my day ...

So, you've got the picture? We could ask the same kind of question about a policeman, or a paramedic, or a traffic warden, or a fireman ... What do these people who are familiar sights to us in our daily living *actually* have to wear and carry for their job?

St Paul and the people of the Church in Ephesus didn't have football referees, or firemen, or paramedics as their visual reference points. So Paul chose a visual image to explain the basics of faith that everyone would be familiar with – the typical, and ubiquitous, Roman Soldier.

Paul was in prison when he wrote his letter, and close to the end of his life. He was surrounded by Roman guards. He would be regularly chained to the wrist of a Roman soldier. The countries, in all his travels, were filled with the occupying Roman legions. And in Rome where he ended up, soldiers were, of course, ten a penny. Everyone knew what they looked like. Everyone was aware what they stood for.

So, as Paul is dictating his letter, he's thinking, "How can I explain these things? What kind of picture, metaphor, visual image can I make use of to help make it clear to these folk in the Church at Ephesus?" And he looks up at the familiar sight of his guard, and at the soldier's armour. And, there it is, right in front of him, his "Thought for the Day", his Podcast, if you like, his visual image, to punch home his message to the Ephesian Christians, to top off the teaching he has been sharing with them up till then. Part by part he takes the armour of the Roman soldier and translates it into Christian terms.

In recent times, the Church has chosen to steer away from military imagery, for fear that it glorifies war and fighting. Hymns such as "Soldiers of Christ arise" and "Onward Christian soldiers" aren't sung much these days. But Paul used what he knew, to glorify service to Christ and nothing else. It wasn't glorifying war, it was using a metaphor that worked.

If it was today, we might be singing "Paramedics of Christ arise" and go through their whole uniform pointing to aspects of the Christian faith; or even "Onward football referees" as a visual image. But Paul didn't have those. So he used what everyone would know – and created a powerful picture for us all.

Look at a soldier, he says, and if you don't have a soldier beside you right now as I have, you'll know well enough what they look like, for you'll have seen them around you often enough. Look at a soldier ...

See ... the belt of truth. The belt ... accessible; reachable; always close at hand. The centre of things from which the sword would hang. The Christian needs to know the truth of God's eternal love, and to be able to access it quickly. It is central, after all.

See ... the breastplate. That's your righteousness. If you are clothed in righteous thoughts, you're safe and protected. You have a defence against accusations. The only way to prevail against the forces of darkness is to show how good a Christian can be.

See ... the sandals. Not some cheap flip-flops, or tatty slippers, or old gardening shoes, but proper, solid sandals, that show you are well equipped and ready to move. These are the "I'm prepared for the journey" sandals, "ready for service" sandals, "geared up for the pilgrimage" sandals.

See ... the shield. The word Paul uses here for "shield" is not some titchy little shield. But a big, oblong, curved, Roman soldier's shield. One of the most dangerous weapons in ancient warfare was the fiery dart, a missile like a petrol bomb. And the great shield was the very weapon to quench it. Faith, Paul is saying, can deal with the darts of temptation, and all the fires of oppression. With Christ, we are safe.

See ... the helmet. That's your salvation, says Paul. However good you feel about your faith, no one said the battle would be easy. You need to face the future, and not just be thankful for the past. So your knowledge of salvation with carry you forward.

See ... the sword. This is the Word of God. This is your weapon of defence and or attack. This is what you must trust. This is what you must know and use. This is what you need to have faith in. This is what is required to be always at hand. The Word of God. Without it, you have nothing.

And see ... no, not *see*. For here is something which is *within* the soldier, which motivates the soldier, which enables the soldier, which sustains the soldier, what makes the soldier what a soldier should be ... And this is prayer: constant prayer; intense prayer; unselfish prayer; sustaining prayer. Pray at all times in the spirit, Paul says, and you will have all you need. And that's been Robin's powerful theme in the six weeks of Podcasts before I took these two Sundays in July.

So there it is! Put on the whole armour of God, as a metaphor, a powerful visual image of what we need to sustain our Christian Faith today.

- The belt of truth
- The breastplate of righteousness
- The sandals of the Gospel of peace
- The shield of faith
- The helmet of salvation
- The sword of the word of God
- And the power of prayer

What an image! What a powerful picture!

My father wasn't a great talker about his faith. He lived a quite life, a living example of faith in action. But he did tell me once what his favourite hymn was. It was the old Irish hymn, "Be thou my vision", sung to the tune *Slane*. And why? Because of this verse in the 1912 version by Eleanor Hull:

*Be Thou my battle Shield, Sword for the fight;
Be Thou my Dignity, Thou my Delight;*

*Thou my soul's Shelter, Thou my high Tow'r:
Raise Thou me heav'nward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.*

"We used to sing it during the War," he would tell me, "and it meant a lot to us."

It's all there in Paul's visual image of the Christian equipped for service and faith. We sang that hymn at my father's funeral. For the War he fought wasn't confined to the battlefields of conflict, it was the war we all know: to be obedient to Christ; to be servants of the spirit of God; to be soldiers of faith; to be ambassadors of the Kingdom.

What do you need to equip you for that my friends, Paul asks? Look at what you know. See that soldier ... There's your image. Go, then, and put on the whole armour of God.

Closing Prayer

So now, let us pray:

Living God, you call us to service and you equip us with what we need. You are our quartermaster, our storekeeper, ready and willing to provide us with all we require for the Christian life. So, measure us up; call us to a fitting; make sure we're dressed right; admire our style. And then, send us out to serve you as we ought.

Bless our Church today. Be with Robin, and all who minister with him and for him and to him in this place. Bless our Church in all corners of this world, that it may strengthen us in witness and service, and be bold in its tasks.

Let your blessing be upon our nation. Guide those who make important decisions. Strengthen those who are our role models. Give purpose to those who serve.

Bring peace to our world, healing where there is brokenness, justice where there is injustice, reconciliation where there is conflict, light where there is darkness, equity where there is discrimination.

Bless those who suffer and those who mourn, those who are sick in body, mind and spirit.

And be with us, separate and together, in kitchen, lounge, garden, conservatory or out for a walk, that we may be ever bound in the one Kingdom of your love.

Hear these our prayers, which we bring to you in Jesus' name. Amen

Benediction

Go with God's blessing. Go, well equipped for service in his most holy name. Put on the whole armour of God.

And may God's blessing rest on you and all those you love, on every step of your journey of life and of faith. Amen.