



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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Be Strong in the Lord Ephesians 6:10-20

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C. S. Lewis wrote a famous book on the subject of spiritual warfare titled *The Screwtape Letters*. It's famous because it's popular and it's popular because of Lewis' genius. He didn't just sit down and write a treatise on the subject. No, he did something very different. I'm sure some of you have read it. Lewis wrote the book as a series of letters from "Uncle Screwtape" to his young nephew, "Wormwood". Wormwood is a young demon, just out of "school" and on his first assignment. He's been given the task of ensure that his "subject" does not go over to the enemy's side and become a Christian. Uncle Screwtape, on the other hand, is an old and experienced tempter he writes letters to his nephew to explain the nature of the battle and to give him advice. If you've never read it, please do. It's entertaining while at the same time deadly serious.

One of the points that Lewis highlights is that most people would rather just ignore the forces of evil. Most people prefer to think that the devil is just an old superstition. In popular culture we portray him as a cartoon with horns and a tail—a character no sensible person would take seriously. Uncle Wormwood points out: this is good. People have no defence against an enemy they don't believe exists. And, of course, the other extreme is what we see in those people who see devils lurking under every rock and behind every tree. A friend of mine blamed the devil when his little daughter, who was just learning to walk, fell down the stairs. Never mind that he left the baby gate open and was so engrossed in what he was doing that he'd let her wander out of sight. Another guy I

know is convinced that God wants him to win the lottery and that it's the devil's fault he keeps losing. Apparently his devil is more powerful than his God! But this opposite extreme can be more subtle too. It's in vogue in some Christians circles to blame the sins of Christians on demonic possession or oppression. Exorcism becomes the answer to everything. But this is just a shortcut to holiness and like so many shortcuts, it's not going to get you there. Our culture is lazy and wants instant gratification and this is just a case of that laziness creeping into the Church. The New Testament—especially St. Paul—is clear that sanctification, the work of holiness, is hard work and nowhere does Scripture tell us exorcism can be a shortcut to sanctification. So we've got to find the balance—and I think if we've immersed ourselves in Scripture we'll find that balance—avoiding both extremes: discounting the devil altogether on the one hand and on the other looking for him behind every tree and assigning him god-like power.

But if the devil is real and if we're really in a war, what do we do? We all struggle. We struggle with impure thoughts. We struggle with anger. We struggle with bitterness. We struggle with ingratitude. We struggle to forgive others. We struggle to trust Jesus instead of money or sex or politics. We struggled to read our Bibles. We struggle to pray. And an awful lot of the time we can often feel very alone in that struggle. We look around the church and think that no one else here faces the struggles that we do, or if they do, these things are no longer a struggle for them because they're such mature Christians. Brothers and Sisters, a lot of that is because most of us have learned to put on a good front. We don't talk with each other about our struggles with sin. We're afraid of being embarrassed. But all this reveals is yet another struggle: we're struggling with pride. And the end result is that our brothers and sisters (1) think they're going it alone, (2) have unrealistic

expectations about what it means to be a Christian, and (3) we all miss out on the benefits of walking together, supporting each other, and praying with and for one another. I'm not saying you've got to break down in tears in front of the whole Church and confess all, but I'm saying that we need to be open with at least one or two or three of our close Christians friends so that we walk together.

As far as the devil goes, as I said, we often give him far too much credit. As I talk with Christians I find that many of us have elevated the devil to god-like status. We think of him as having virtually unlimited power and attributes that belong only to God. We need to remember that he's a finite created being. He's not God. He doesn't know all. He can't read your mind. He's not everywhere at once. And he's got a limited number of fellow devils to do his work. And it only makes sense that they're going to deploy themselves where the battle is most urgent and where they can do the most damage. Remember that in our baptismal vows we renounce not only the devil, but also the world and the flesh. Most of us don't need any demonic help to fall into sin. The world and the flesh give us fight enough! But it's hard—often impossible—to know the source of our temptations. At the end of the day it doesn't really matter. We're in a fight and in our Epistle this morning St. Paul tells us how to do battle. What he tells us here applies no matter where the source of temptation comes from. Look with me again at Ephesians 6, beginning at verse 10. Here's what Paul tells us:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

We're in a battle and it's not a battle we can win on our own power. The Lord has to win this one. But that's easy to say. How do we do it? Well, Paul now gives us an image of a soldier putting on his armour and taking up his weapons:

Put on the whole armor of God, 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

Put on the armour that God's given you. But first, Paul backs up for a couple of verses. Before we jump into the fight we need to remember who we're fighting. We get the sense earlier in Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus that they needed this warning. They were fighting each other. Paul had to remind them back in Chapter 4: Walk with each other in humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with each other. Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, he told them. Don't shoot your own. That's a sure-fire way to lose before you start.

But remember, too, that our fight is not against flesh and blood. Brothers and Sisters, remember this. We fight not against flesh and blood. We forget this much too easily. Think of Israel in Jesus' day. The reason the people rejected Jesus was because he was directing his fight at the wrong thing—or so they thought. The Jews were convinced that the Romans were the enemy. The Messiah, so they thought, was supposed to ride in on a great warhorse, someone like King David but greater and more powerful, and he would destroy the Romans and all the other pagan nations. But, instead, Jesus spent much of his time rebuking the people who were pushing that sort of thinking. The Romans weren't the enemy. Sin and death were—and still are—the enemy and they're the common enemy of all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. The Romans killed Jesus and people saw him as a loser, when in reality, by his

death and resurrection Jesus was dealing a death blow to sin and death. So remember who the enemy is. It's not your brother or your sister with whom you had a disagreement. And it isn't people of who follow false religion, or people aligned with a different political party, or even soldiers or terrorists working for some overseas power. The enemy is the devil. Deal with him, deal with sin and death, and everything else sorts itself out.

Now, back to the armour of God. What does it look like? First, verse 14:

Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth...

Remember that the message we proclaim is true. Everything stands or falls on this. Every other bit of armour hangs on this piece. Jesus is Lord. It's the message carved on the lychgate that we pass under when we come to the Church. It's the Good News that we proclaim. Jesus is Lord. Caesar isn't lord. Money isn't lord. Sex isn't lord. Power isn't lord. Reputation isn't lord. Self isn't lord. Jesus is Lord. In his death and resurrection he inaugurated his kingdom. It's breaking into the world and nothing will stand before it. If that is true, it changes literally *everything*. This is the truth that holds everything else together.

Second, Paul writes:

...put on the breastplate of righteousness...

A soldier's breastplate protected his vital organs from injury from a frontal attack and Paul tells us to put on "righteousness" or "justice" the way a soldier would buckle on his breastplate. I say "justice" because it might better carry the sense of what Paul is getting at. When we think of "righteousness" the first thing we often think of is holiness or sinlessness and so we might think Paul is saying

to buckle on holiness as if it were a breastplate, but that's not it. What he's getting at is our reliance on the truth that the Lord God is the world's one true Judge and that, as Judge, he intends to—actually, he's in the process of—setting this broken world to rights. He set this process in motion when he vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. In the Resurrection he, as Judge, ruled Jesus to be in the right. And part of the Good News is that if we are in Jesus, if we've repented and let go of everything that is not Jesus and instead trusted in the truth that he is Lord, then we are vindicated by the Judge too. This is what it means to be "justified". Yes, we are sinners, but because we are in Jesus, we are in the right before God. It's this truth that protects our vitals from attack.

Next, in verse 15:

...as shoes for your feet...put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

Stand firmly in another truth: the truth that in Jesus you and I are at peace with God—we have been reconciled to him. Paul wrote about this back in Chapter 2 when he said:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... He came and preached peace to you who were far off [that's the Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [that's the Jews]. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:11-13, 17-19)

The devil, not to mention the world and the flesh, will do everything to make you forget that Jesus has restored you to God's friendship and fellowship. The devil will do everything to make you forget that you have been forgiven and declared just before God. That's what "the satan" means. It's a Hebrew title that means "the accuser". He will accuse you and try to demoralise you and try to knock you off your feet, so stand firm in the gospel, the Good News, of peace.

Fourth, look at verse 16:

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.

Paul compares the attacks of the enemy to flaming arrows. They don't just pierce, they set fire—and things burn down. Our enemies cause us to doubt. We face circumstances that can drive us to hopelessness. We can be beaten down so that we see no way out or we become so obsessed with what's happening today that we forget our future hope. And so Paul tells us to shield ourselves with faith—faith in Jesus, what he has done and what he will do. Remember our Eucharistic acclamation. Remember the "mystery of faith": Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Jesus in his resurrection, Paul writes to the Corinthians, is the firstfruits of the resurrection to come—that day at the end of the age when he raises the faithful dead to life and sets the world to rights once and for all. We live in hope of life and of new creation. We are people of the Resurrection. And Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit as a down-payment and a foretaste of the resurrected life of the kingdom. When tempted to doubt, take up the shield of faith.

The final defensive piece of equipment is the helmet:

...and take the helmet of salvation...

Brothers and Sisters, remember that Jesus has already won the key battle. He won it when he rose from the grave that first Easter morning. Death was crushed that day. These battles we fight are all secondary and we can stand and fight our way through them confident in the knowledge that Jesus has already saved us from our ultimate enemy.

But these are all defensive pieces of armour. The Lord will keep us standing fast and he'll keep us from defeat if we'll remember his truth and his salvation, but he also expects us to take the battle to the enemy. And so Paul tells us in verse 17:

...and [take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...

When I was a kid I had a leather Bible cover with a sword on it. The Bible *is* the word of God, inspired by the Spirit, but Paul's being more specific here. This is the same "word" he writes about in Chapter 5 where he talks about Jesus having cleansed the Church through the power of his word—his Gospel or Good News—again the truth on which our faith and our peace and our justification rest: Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again. Brothers and Sisters, protected by the Lord's might we are called to go out into the world as heralds, proclaiming that Jesus has died and risen again and that he is Lord. We're called to proclaim this to a world where Caesar is lord, where money is lord, where sex is lord, where power is lord, where self is lord.

It's interesting that Paul borrows all this imagery from Isaiah's prophecy—passages where it's the Messiah who puts on things like righteousness and faithfulness and peace as pieces of his armour. The Messiah goes on the offensive with a sword that proceeds from his mouth. Paul draws on the well-known passage:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7)

And through Jesus the Messiah the Lord God does reign. Through Jesus the Messiah his kingdom is established. And here Paul's using this language describing the work of the Messiah to bring peace and salvation and he's applying it to us, to you and to me. We are called to carry on his work, calling the world to repent because Jesus' kingdom is breaking in. The present evil age is passing away and the age to come is here.

But Paul lists one final thing. Without it the armour and the word will never accomplish what they should. He goes on:

... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. (Ephesians 6:18)

Don't stop praying. Why? Because prayer is communion with God. Notice, Paul mentions prayer and supplication as two things. Supplication *is* prayer. Specifically, it's prayer in which we ask for something. Paul is about to ask the Ephesians to pray for him because he's in prison—not so much that he's released, but that he will be effective in proclaiming the Good News despite his situation. I think Paul makes this distinction between prayer and supplication for a reason and that's that there's more to prayer than asking. Jesus tells us to pray for our daily bread, for grace to forgive, and that we might be delivered from trial. As we put on all these pieces of Gospel armour and as we take up the sword of the Gospel to go into battle we need to pray about the specifics of the battle we're about to face, but prayer is more than asking. I hadn't

really thought about this until last week. I was listening to a sermon on prayer, but all the preacher talked about was prayer as asking God for things and for stuff. Brothers and Sisters, prayer is more than that. Again, prayer is communion with God and, when it comes to the battle, we need to be in communion with him just as much as we need to remember truth and righteousness and faith and the word. Communion is the reason Jesus died and rose again. God created us in the beginning for fellowship with himself and it's to restore our fellowship with him that he sent his Son to be a means of forgiveness, and it's to have fellowship with us that he gave us his word through the prophets and apostles and evangelists. We hear the truth of the Good News. We read the words of the Lord in Scripture. He speaks to us. In prayer we speak back to him. And while we may ask him for help and for the necessities of life and for success in the battle, more than anything else prayer is our time to respond to his Good News and to his Word, to his grace and to his provision with praise and thanksgiving. When people tell me that they struggle to pray, they usually go on to say that they feel that they've got little or nothing to say beyond asking for things. Brothers and Sisters, if you've got nothing to say, it's because you haven't been steeping yourself in the Word and allowing God to first speak to you. If you've got nothing to say to God, you haven't been meditating on the deep, deep love he's shown us in sending his Son to die for our sins. Friends, prayer is our opportunity to respond to our God who has given himself in Jesus and who has spoken to us in his Word.

Perhaps the reason we struggle with prayer is the same reason we struggle with these other pieces of armour and even with the sword. We can't put on what we don't know. We can't wield what we haven't taken seriously. Steep yourselves in the Word and meditate on the Good News that Jesus

has died, that he has risen, and that he is Lord of all. If you struggle to do that. If you don't know where to begin, one of the greatest resources the Church has ever produced sits in the racks in front you: those maroon books. The Book of Common prayer offers liturgies that you can pray with a group or that you can pray yourself morning and evening. It immerses you in Scripture, it leads you in confession of sin, it reminds you of the Good News that Jesus died and rose for you. It teaches you to pray the psalms back to God, making his Word your own prayers, and it guides you in prayers of thanksgiving and praise and supplication. If you don't know where to start, I can't think of a better place. If 16th Century English doesn't work for you, there are modern-language versions available—we even have some small booklets that we don't use anymore. Take one and start letting God speak to you and then start praying back. That's communion.

As we sing in the well-known hymn, "Soldiers of Christ, arise, and put your armour on. Strong in the strength which God supplies through His eternal Son." Put it on: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. Charge into the battle with the Good News that Jesus who died and rose again is the world's true Lord. And pray. Gird yourselves with prayer—living out the communion with God that the Good News makes a reality. But Paul assumes we've got a grasp of these things already. You can't put on what you don't have. Dear Friends, immerse yourself in Scripture. Hear God's Word and let it permeate your life. Memorise it. Meditate on it. Meditate on the Good News—on the deep, deep love of God revealed in Jesus at the Cross. Meditate on Jesus, risen from the dead and what that means for each of us. Meditate on the hope we have in Jesus and the Spirit—hope of life and communion with God. And pray. Let these things so permeate your heart and mind that communion with God becomes your great desire—so that

you can thank him and praise him for who he is, for his love, mercy, and grace. Then, Brothers and Sisters, take the light Jesus has given you and charge into the darkness.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, through Jesus you've given us pardon and peace. You've called us into battle and given us everything we need. Teach us now how to value and to use the gifts you've given to us that we might be effective in the calling and mission you've given us, to carry the light of Christ to people lost in darkness. We ask this in his name. Amen.