

August 25th 2024

Ephesians Chapter 6

Today we come to the last of our Ephesians series, having covered its six chapters over six Sundays. To recap, Ephesians started by reviewing the key elements of the gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus and the salvation that bought us. Paul reminds us that this gospel led to the forming of a family in Christ, based on our common relationship with Jesus regardless of our own backgrounds. That's not strange for us, but to Paul's original audience all business and personal dealings were carried out around the big divide between Jews and Gentiles; it had been that way since anyone could remember, and few questioned it. So founding a new church that included members across this divide stood out radically. (Unity in the church is a big theme across Paul's letters.)

Having re-capped the gospel message in our first three chapters, Paul then moved on to challenge the new Christians on its implications. What will the gospel mean for their, and our, lives in the church? And for our family relationships? The Bible's words on the family come to a world in which they could no more have conceived of civilisation without slavery, than we could relate to lifestyles before electricity was harnessed. (It's not even just the obvious devices we use. Imagine being without the access to knowledge we get from computers and the internet.) Doing without slavery, and the general hierarchal order of society, was as unimaginable as that to Paul's hearers. Slavery was just a given, on which civilisation rested. And although eventually the gospel, carried to its logical extent, would play a large part in breaking down slavery in Christian parts of the world, that was a long way down the track. For now, Paul is speaking into the situation the church members are in. It's estimated that, in the cities, around a third of the population were slaves. That means that probably most of the members of the first Christian congregations, either owned slaves, or were slaves. So Paul is dealing with their everyday lives in considering the gospel's impact on relationships between slave and free, parent and child. To establish our basis for relating to God and each other, he taps into the ten commandments, already well-known to his hearers. He quotes from Exodus¹, "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. That would have been unsurprising. But what follows was radical. For context, he's speaking to a world where fathers had pretty much absolute control over their household's lives. It started when a child was born. The father had to formally show his acceptance of the new baby into his family by picking it up, when it was put down in front of him. If he had any doubts about the child's paternity, or its physical or mental normality, or if it was a girl when he'd really wanted a boy, he had only to walk away and the child would be discarded outside to die. Two radical things that early Christians were remarked on for, is that they didn't sleep around, and they didn't discard their unwanted children. That was unusual enough that everyone noticed.

Against a societal backdrop that gave any individual desires of children relatively little importance, Paul tells fathers they shouldn't goad, annoy, exasperate their children.

¹ Ex: 20:12

Fancy worrying about that! Fathers are to be concerned with their children's Christian education and they are told to act in ways which will grow their family's spiritual lives. Our own responsibility is to give any younger people we have influence over, a knowledge of God and his ways. Younger members of our families should see our faith in action, so they will see good principles they can apply. Will they see us doing whatever we can legally get away with that suits us, or will they see us acting to benefit God's kingdom? A reverence for God in the home, an acceptance that we all are responsible to God for our own actions towards others, will lead to healthy family relationships. We can still have home banter, good-natured insults that fly around the table, but everyone needs to feel that's from a place of trust and secure belonging. Even with the vast social differences between our world and Paul's, some principles remain sound. We heard last week of the radical concept that a husband is to prioritise his wife's well-being. And it's to the children's ultimate benefit that they slot into a family, rather than devising their own kingdom around themselves. Whether it's children obeying parents, and parents wanting their highest good, or slaves and masters caring about each other, Biblical instructions seem to go both ways. In both families and churches, we are to live in a way that uses whatever brief power or authority we have, to advance God's kingdom. Church life will be different from the world's, Paul suggests that we should find ourselves in conflict with the world's values. That's where God's armour comes in. -Like it or not, there is a war on, and we're in it!

He tells us in verse ten to be strong in the Lord. 'Be strong' might be better translated as 'be strengthened' – this strength isn't just your capacity to pull yourself up by your bootstraps in adversity. Grammatically, it's in the same structure as when Paul tells us 'be filled with the Spirit'² – we allow God to give us strength for a purpose.

When Paul's hearers heard in today's reading about the need for us to use the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, they would have recognised the armour from Isaiah, where it's connected with God's eternal justice.

'The Lord put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.' *Is. 59: 17*

It applies to the final spiritual battle between good and evil. Armour, like all equipment, is for its purpose.

In a small way, this reminds me of when our kids were little, and swimming goggles were in vogue. When we were at the aquatic centre one day, one of our kids, reluctant to immerse himself in water at the best of times, asked for the latest peer-group-approved goggles. I was reluctant to buy them. It just seemed like one more lose-able item to keep track of. But I had a flash of inspiration. 'Well, you won't need them if you're never going to go in above knee-deep, will you?', I said. Next thing I know, he's splashing up to his neck. We bought the goggles.

² Ephesians 5:18

Like swimming goggles and other equipment, armour wasn't meant so you can admire yourself in the mirror, or have other people think you look good. It's not even to make yourself feel braver. In Old Testament times, it was an honour to wear the King's armour, and you did it only to fight battles in his name.

'Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.' In Paul's understanding of God's armour, first comes truth, our confidence that the Christian gospel is true. It proclaims righteousness, the way by which we are put right with God.

'with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.'

The gospel of peace means peace with God, and then among each other.

'In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.' The shield of faith in our trust in the victory of Christ, and the power of God.

'Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.'

The helmet protecting your head matters so much. It's from the head we are sometimes faced with self-accusations that we're not good enough, we'll never make it. It's in the head we remember oddments we read online, perhaps how this or that Biblical event can't be true, or we swallow bits of folk-knowledge repeated by public figures. Drifting with popular opinion is easy, but it won't usually grow our faith, Against this public flotsam, if we have received Jesus we can know ourselves to be saved, not because we're good enough, but because he is. It seems that the fundamentals will stay with us into old age. I find that comforting, because I've recently reached the stage of life where incredibly young-looking hospital doctors start to ask me if I know where I am, and who the prime minister is – why do I need to know that?

When I think of some of the godly older people I've known, even where their short-term memory doesn't match the memory of others, they mostly remain quite secure about the core of their faith. So I might forget where the shops are, but I'll probably always know that God loves me. And amidst any of our uncertainties and fears, God's word says his strength is enough. Paul closes by reminding his hearers of the central importance of prayer to the church. Our relationships and goals are different because of Jesus. We have God's strength to use for his purposes as we reflect his kingdom values on earth. Amen