

22 August 2021 – Stand Firm

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 84 (responsively)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

**My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.**

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young.

**Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. ...**

One day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

**I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of the wicked.**

For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; who bestows favour and honour.

No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Ephesians 6:10-24

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 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. 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.

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 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. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. ...

Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.



MESSAGE– Stand Firm

These words are the last part of Paul’s letter to this church community in Ephesus. Last words are important and often linger in the mind. Like us, this community does not dominate the public space but is quietly living out its call as God’s people. What message are they left with?



Be strong in the Lord ... put on God’s armour ... so you can stand ... on the day of evil against the unseen spiritual forces of evil. Paul is not encouraging us to go on a wild pursuit of evil. Neither is he inviting us to obsess about evil. Rather, the clear call is to stand our ground when we are assailed. This call is consistent with the line from the Lord’s Prayer ‘Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil’.

The evil that we are being warned against is not overt, in-your-face, obvious evil. It is

more subtle and its source is hard to pin down, but no less real. It might be the casual racism that is directed daily against people of colour or the sexism that discriminates against women. Such evils are pervasive and deep-rooted.



It might be government policy that dictates that it’s okay to pursue 11,000 Centrelink recipients who received slightly too much in JobSeeker payments last year but if businesses were overpaid JobKeeper by millions of dollars that’s perfectly fine. It might be the shrug of resignation that it’s now too hard to rescue people who helped Australian forces in Afghanistan and ignoring the fact that Australia has deliberately chosen to make

the application process difficult and time-consuming.

Paul assures us that the evil is real and will attempt to make our faith lukewarm. What approach might we take to this warning?

*We may view the whole discussion as a **fantasy**, more akin to escapism such as Star Wars, Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings ...*

*Some of us may **fear** these unseen spiritual forces (as happens in many cultures around the world who adopt various methods for appeasing these spirits) or may become somewhat paranoid (e.g. people who hold to conspiracy theories) ...*

*Or, better, we may take a position of **faith**, recognizing that Jesus took the notion of evil spirits and the devil seriously. This suggests we will listen to the warnings of Jesus (and Paul) and will turn to God and rely on God’s methods to keep us safe ...*

How are we stand firm? What is the armour of God that we are to wear? The imagery is that of a Roman soldier prepared for battle, like one the soldiers who may have been guarding Paul in prison. But if we look beyond the named items of clothing we are asked to clothe ourselves with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God.

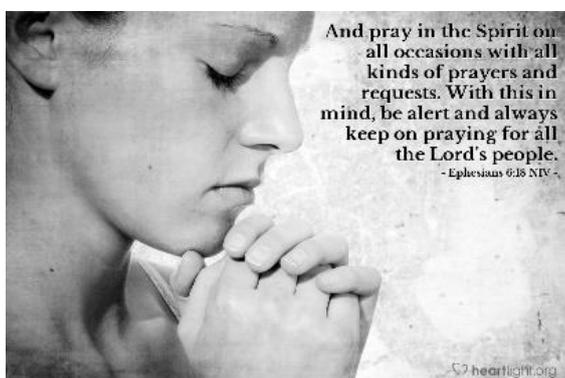
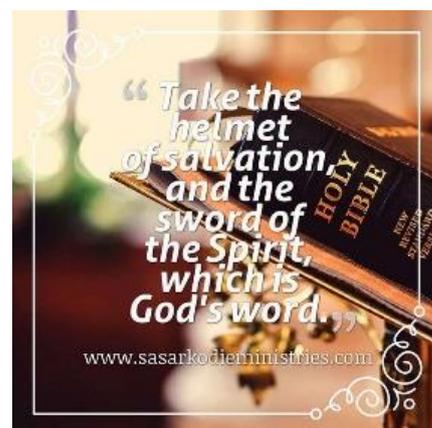
These are all **internal attitudes**. They may remind us of the various fruits of the Spirit. But earlier in this letter Paul has already exhorted us to clothe ourselves with the character of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22-24).

There may also be an echo here of a passage from the prophet Isaiah who writes:



*Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. ...
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ...
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation for his head ... (Isaiah 59:14-17)*

Most of the armour is defensive, except for the word of God and prayer. **The word of God** is Scripture that recalls the character and actions of God and God’s people through history. It includes the gospel story and the many blessings that flow from this (e.g. chapters 1-3 of this letter to the Ephesians). As we take this word of God deeply into our lives we are assured that God is good and gracious, that God loves us, forgives us and blesses us, and that we are children of God, marked with God’s Holy Spirit. These internalised truths make us strong.



We are also called to **pray in the Spirit**. This suggests that in addition to bringing our requests to God in prayer, we will let God’s Spirit guide our prayers. We will listen to what God may be saying to us, we will agree with God’s view of us. Eugene Peterson writes that prayer is the place where our needs and weaknesses meet God’s abundant grace and power. You might like to read over Paul’s prayers from this letter (1:15-23, 3:14-21, 6:18-20) and ask that we would indeed know the fullness of Christ’s love for

us, the hope to which we have been called and our future inheritance, along with God’s power to accomplish much more than we can ask or imagine. God’s Spirit strengthens us when we don’t have the words (Romans 8:26-27).

What Paul is describing is sometimes called spiritual warfare. It’s the thoughts that enter our heads at three in the morning when we can’t sleep, that imagine terrible things for the people we love. It’s that

little voice that tells us that we are a bad person or a bad Christian and that God could never love us. And it's the institutional evil seen in government policies like locking up innocent asylum seekers for years and years simply because they had the temerity to come here by boat, knowing that such a stance wins votes at the ballot box. Spiritual warfare is also the discouraging voice that tells us not to bother seeking justice because our voice will make no difference, so just accept the way things are. To help us mature and grow up in Christ, Paul suggests we immerse ourselves in Scripture and pray consistently. What other spiritual practices are we building into our lives to deepen our dependence on God? How do we encourage those who are struggling?