

EPHESIANS 6:10-20
STAND FIRM TOGETHER

Life is getting hard; the first flush of enthusiasm has gone and things are becoming a bit of a struggle. We are dealing with big issues and hard questions and we're not sure that some of us like that. Some of things we're talking about are hard for us to deal with; it is not that we don't understand, sometimes we understand only too well, but there are some who are offended by what they hear and are beginning to drift away. Some are not there so often when we meet; some have gone home and are not in the crowd anymore; they have left, telling us that this is too hard. I'm not sure how Jesus feels; it must be hard for Him to watch the group that you're leading get smaller and see people leave. He even said to us that if we wanted to leave as well...; what were we to say? It is a question of loyalty after all, but there is no-one else; there is nowhere for us to go; He is the only One who gives us the hope of eternal life. We told Him so and pledged our loyalty; we want to stand firm with Jesus to the end! Is that how Jesus's disciples saw things when people began drifting away?

What gives our faith its strength? Where do we find that stickability that the disciples had? It is a struggle at times for us to be Christians and to live a Christian life. We want to be the kind of people that God wants, but it's hard; the Bible challenges us to live by Jesus' values in a world that walks by a different road and we stand out from the crowd and that's hard. Or life presents us with difficult things to deal with, painful things, dilemmas that we never dreamt we'd face. Faith raises opposition at home, or amongst our friends, or at work; there is conflict in church – that's not how it was supposed to be when we started with great enthusiasm. It has always been this way for Christians, trying to follow Jesus; we were reading the other day about Hudson Taylor, the great nineteenth century missionary to China, a man looked up to by generations of Christians; he buried two wives and six children through his life, full of pain and grief. What gives our faith its strength? Where do we find stickability?

The theme of the last part of Ephesians is clear. "Stand". Four times in just a few lines Paul encourages them to stand: "*Put on...*" (*Ephesians 6:11*) "*Put on...*" (*Ephesians 6:13f*) "Stand" is about sticking with Jesus even when life is hard and the questions are unanswered. "Stand" is about loyalty to Jesus even when life and faith are a bit of a struggle. "Stand" is about finding the courage to be Christians in a world where not everyone thinks that's a good idea. The Christians in Ephesus would experience these struggles; they are our struggles too. They lived in a world dominated by the Roman Empire and all its gods and most of all its worship of the Emperor: "Caesar is Lord!" When the Christians said that "Jesus is Lord!" they came into direct conflict with the Empire and some were persecuted and others were thrown into prison; Christian leaders like Paul were killed, imprisoned, or exiled, punished for no more than being believers. Paul is encouraging them to stand firm in their faith despite their circumstances, in the face of difficult circumstances; they are to "stand firm", to hold on to their faith, to remain loyal to Jesus, to find courage to live as Jesus' people in all their days. The challenge that we face is much the same!

The whole soldier and armour picture is about the resources to help us stand! Look at the whole picture: what picture does Paul paint? He paints a picture of the soldier, fully armoured and armed; every part of his body is protected and he has a weapon that will help him both defend himself and attack the enemy when he comes close. Every part of the soldier is protected; he has everything he needs to stand firm in line; he is equipped to play his part in the defence of the city! The Christian has the equipment to stand firm: "*Put on...*" (*Ephesians 6:13*) We will look at the separate bits in a moment, but first, take a look at the whole picture: God has given us all the equipment we need to stand firm in our faith. Here is where our faith gets its strength from; here is where we find that stickability that we need. It doesn't come from within us; it is not a natural strength that strong people have; it is the grace that comes from God to help us be and to remain His people. There is no part of us or no part of life where we

need to be vulnerable; God is with us always and God equips us to meet every difficult circumstance in our life and in our faith.

There are six pieces of armour, each piece has something to do for us.

“*stand firm...*” (*Ephesians 6:14*) the belt held all the other pieces together, underneath; our hidden strength and confidence comes from the truth, from a life built on the truth of the gospel and the integrity, honesty and sincerity of the Christian.

“*with the...*” (*Ephesians 6:14b*) the heart is protected by the breastplate: we are justified, made righteous in God’s eyes by Jesus’ death on the cross; we are who we are as Christians because of what God has done for us; our sense of assurance comes from here.

“*with your...*” (*Ephesians 6:15*) the studded boots equipped the soldier for a long march and gave him a solid stance; the gospel gives us that stability and makes us ready to tell others the good news about Jesus.

“*take up...*” (*Ephesians 6:16*) the long oblong shield was the added protection that the soldier could use to knock away the enemy’s attacks; faith grips onto God’s promises and power, and helps us to stand firm, standing on the promises of God.

“*take the...*” (*Ephesians 6:17*) the tough metal helmet protects the head of the soldier; our salvation that God has worked for us by His enormous power is always for us, always ours and nothing can take it away from us.

“*and the...*” (*Ephesians 6:17b*) the short sword was used in close-combat both in defence and attack; the Bible is not a really piece of armour but the place where we find out about the other five; it tells us about the truth, that we are justified by Jesus on the cross, about our salvation and so on.

Here’s where we find our strength and stickability. Training is part and parcel of the soldier’s life and is what keeps him/her going in the heat of battle. When the fight is toughest that’s when rely on the hard work that went into basic training back home. Without wanting to do the picture to death, training and equipping are what help us to stand firm in the heat of the spiritual battle we face, when we struggle, when we have to deal with hard things. Here’s the biggest and best argument, if need one, for reading the Bible; this is our training and equipping for standing firm. For example, the helmet of salvation: we need to understand what God has done in salvation for us and the best place to find out about salvation is in the Bible. “What is truth?” someone once asked. Again, the Bible tells us what truth is and shows us how to be people of integrity and honesty. “How do I find faith?” The Bible shows us Jesus as someone totally reliable, worthy of our trust, and inspires us to come to faith in Him. Strength and stickability will be much easier to find if we read and digest the Bible. There are all kinds of ways to help you do that in the vestibule today.

Finally, “*pray in...*” (*Ephesians 6:18*) Prayer is not part of the armour, but prayer is the atmosphere in which we put on the armour; prayer expresses our dependence on God and connects us with the power and grace of God to help us when life is hard. When we pray for one another, we express that deep sense of community, a shared experience of life and faith and that has more power than we know. Lots of people express a deep sense of appreciation that people they hardly know will take time to pray for them in their hour of need. God is at work in all of us and prayer is an expression of that community. These words are not expressed to individuals; they are written to a church community, to a group of people who, together, are trying to work out what it means to “stand firm”; we do this together. Sadly, though, when life gets hard – and maybe this is a Scottish thing – we take ourselves off and suffer on our own, just at the very time when we need each other most.

Joshua was coming to the end of his life; he was the leader in Israel, and the book that bears his name tells his story. At the end, he asks people about their stickability with God, about their loyalty. “Choose whom you will serve” in their sometimes hostile world; he leads by example: “*As for...*” (*Joshua 24:15*) The people know their Bible, so to speak; they know what God has done for them and because God has saved them and has been faithful, the people

say “we too...” (24:18) The strength to stand firm comes from the grace that God has given, and is a response to God’s salvation.

What gives our faith its strength? Where does our stickability come from? Our strength and stickability come from God’s grace at work in us. God equips us; God gives us courage. He has saved us with a salvation that can’t be moved; He has loved us and promised all sorts of good things to us; He has told us about all of this in the Bible. Jesus’ disciples said: “Lord, to whom...” (John 6:68) Joshua said: “as for...” (Joshua 24:15) What will we say? “Stand” and stay standing? It’s hard; it’s a struggle; it always has been; God knows what we face and is able to help us; “stand” and stay standing in faith, in love for God, in living a Christian life? God has given us everything that we need, with a salvation and a faith that nothing can take away; pray for the courage to stand!