

Ephesians 6:10-20

Resilience

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 round 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 open my mouth, 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.

One of the words of Covid times is resilience. We're told that we need resilience to have a good reaction to the pandemic, so that we can come out the other side of it in a good frame of mind. Resilience is the capacity, among other things, to be strong in the face of difficult experiences. Lots of people have found Covid hard; I've heard young people say that for all of lockdown last year, they simply stayed in bed; they saw no reason to get up; there was no school to go to and nowhere else to go, or nothing else to do. Resilience is what gives us the strength to find our way through these stressful and difficult times. Psychologists will tell you all about the qualities that make us resilient – the strong mind that we have, or the inner determination not to be beaten – and that people who don't have these qualities will fall down under the pressure. The Cambridge Dictionary word of the year 2021 is "perseverance" – it has the same sense as resilience, another name for the same quality.

God is making a new family. That is what Ephesians is all about. The family is created by God's grace, bringing people from all sorts of places and backgrounds, all having a place in the family by grace through faith in Jesus. The second half of Ephesians is asking the question "What does God's new family look like?" What qualities does this new family have? First of all, we saw that it is one family, united in love, patience and kindness; then it is a work-in-progress family, putting off the old ways and putting on new ones; it is a family that is learning to show a family-likeness, being like Jesus; then last week, it is to be a good-relationships family, people being concerned for one another. Today, finally, it is to be a family with resilience.

The first-century Church didn't have to face a pandemic, but they did have difficulties all of their own. There were people travelling around the first-century world telling them that their faith was all wrong; according to these people the Christians were believing the wrong things, but if they abandoned Jesus and followed something else, life would be so much better.

Subtle but stressful! They were also facing up to the hostile Roman empire as the authorities tried to stamp out this new-found Christian faith: Christians were thrown into prison for their faith, or thrown to the lions and killed when they refused to salute Caesar as Lord. The new-found family of God often met in secret, for fear of the authorities. Paul also saw something deeper: he saw that there was a spiritual battle taking place, a battle for the heart and the mind, where the devil was the hidden enemy; behind the scenes, the devil subtly and dangerously was casting doubt in their minds, suggesting that their faith was a sham; “did God really say...? give it up; leave it behind.” The Christians needed resilience.

“Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power... Stand firm then...” (verses 10,14) The Church is to be resilient, a family that stands strong in the faith even in the face of hard times. The strength and resilience they have comes from God’s power at work in them. This resilience is not down to their own inner qualities but comes from the power of God at work in their lives. They depend on God. The Bible doesn’t tell us to “pull your socks up!”; the Bible points us to Jesus and His power so that we may learn to trust Him and depend on Him for our strength, our resilience, and our well-being.

Paul would have seen thousands of Roman soldiers in his lifetime and now he turns the soldier into an illustration of the way by which God gives resilience to His people. Each piece of the soldier’s armour has something special for us that helps us be strong and resilient. The soldier’s belt held all of the armour together, a sort of hidden strength; the Christian’s inner strength comes first of all from the truth, from believing what is true and from being people of integrity. The breastplate protects the heart: in Jesus, God has given us hearts that are right; we are forgiven, safe from any condemnation. The soldier needed his feet to have a firm grip of the ground: peace is a gift from God in the gospel; we are people living at peace with God, giving us a firm place to stand. The shield protects the soldier from enemy attacks just as faith reminds us who we are and that we belong to Jesus. Wearing the helmet keeps his head safe: God saves us and nobody can tell us otherwise. Finally, the sword both defends and attacks: the Bible equips us to stand firm, food for our souls, pointing us in the direction of all these other gifts. Prayer stands over all of that, allowing us to access the power of God so that we may stand firm.

“be strong in the Lord... Stand firm... put on the armour of God...” (verse 10, 14,11) God makes us strong, by all that He has done for us in Jesus. The devil’s tactic so often is “Did God really say...?” We see that tactic in the garden of Eden to Eve; we see that tactic in the wilderness to Jesus; it is the same tactic that he uses to us, not outright full-frontal attack, but insidious, subtle, casting doubt into our hearts and minds. Jesus had the answer to the devil: He knew His bible and He knew what God had promised and what God had done. The armour of God reminds us of what God has promised to us and what God has done for us. “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31) “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” (Romans 8:1) “Son, your sins are forgiven.” (Mark 2:5) These three pieces of Bible alone are words by which we can find resilience for our faith.

This is why it really matters that we read the Bible for ourselves. This is not an intelligence thing, that we know the Bible so that we can quote it and can quote it more than the next person! Don't read the Bible to boast! We read the Bible so that our faith is strong. Here's what happens: we read the Bible and we discover several things – we discover what people are like and that the Bible characters are people just like us; but much more, we discover what God is like, especially as we see Jesus. When we discover what God is like, we learn that He is Someone we can trust, with lots of qualities that we can admire. The more we discover about God, the more we learn to trust Him, the stronger will be our faith, the more resilient we will be. It begins by reading the Bible.

Being resilient isn't easy. Resilience doesn't mean what we laugh off difficult experiences as if they don't matter or don't bother us. Being resilient means facing up to some quite tough times, navigating our way through these tough times, and coming out at the other end with our faith intact. Are any of you Munro-baggers? The Munroes are mountains in Scotland over 3000 feet; there are 282 of them altogether and some people have climbed all of them. I'm not sure that any of them are straightforward or easy, but some are extraordinarily difficult, even just looking at them in pictures. For some people life is like climbing a whole series of mountains; you've dealt with one hard time and you're looking for respite, but then along comes another hard experience to deal with; it wears you down. Resilience can be hard, but resilience matters; resilience in the Christian bears witness to the grace of God and the strength that He gives. Resilience allows us to stand strong in our faith.

We are still having to deal with Covid and its restrictions; we still have no real idea what church life will look like in the days to come, but we are trying to pick it up a little bit at a time. The General Assembly has told the Church that we need to reshape church life: there are too few ministers to go round and too little money so we need to reshape church life in the way that we provide leadership. On top of all of that, we live in a time when many of the people around us have decided that the church doesn't matter to them anymore and even some of those who are members of the church have taken that in and they too have walked away. God hasn't walked away; God is still with us and God is still strong. In the face of all of these difficult times for the Church or for us personally, God's family is to be a resilient family; we are to be a resilient church, strong in the power of God, standing firm in our faith. That's the challenge for us; we don't do it on our own, but we do it together as family; we don't do it on our own, we do it in the strength and power of God.