

Putting On

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Date: 01 December 2019

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. Nice to see you all. We're beginning a new sermon series tonight for the season of Advent. It's called Come Among Us, Prayers for Advent.

And the prayers we're looking at are called collects. Each collect collects, do you get it? And shapes our prayers of praise and longing and our desires and our requests around a particular theme.

And the collects are inspired by Scripture. So each week we'll take a closer look at one of the Bible texts that inspires that collect for Sunday.

And this evening, we prayed together the collect for the first Sunday in Advent. It was written by Archbishop Thomas Cramner for the publication of the first prayer book in 1549, almost 500 years ago.

And for those of you who are new to this Anglican thing, what is Advent anyway? Well, the word Advent, it just means coming. And these days, if we talk about Advent at all, we seem to think it's really just about waiting for Christmas or waiting to celebrate Jesus' birth.

[1 : 13] But one close look at Cramner's collect will quickly show you that it isn't really, that isn't really what Advent is about at all. Listen to this again.

Do you see there, there's a time-bending nature to Advent, which this collect captures beautifully. It ties together Jesus Christ's first coming with his final coming, and it brings together our human present with our eternal future. It teaches us that our present life is an incubator for our future and enduring life.

The stakes are very high. Casting away the works of darkness, putting on the armor of light, that doesn't sound much like cozily decorating the Christmas tree and setting up the nativity scene, does it?

I don't usually associate darkness and warfare with the Christmas season. Except, regrettably, fistfights and mob violence on Black Friday. But I know that none of you were a part of that, were you?

[2 : 40] But we prayed tonight in this collect for divine protection amidst a very real and dangerous spiritual battle against a supernatural enemy who will stop at nothing to destroy Jesus Christ, his church, and his children.

What are we to make of that? Well, one of the scriptures which inspired this collect is Ephesians 6, 10 to 20, which you just heard read. And it's very helpful now if you have your Bible open with me to that passage.

The moment I start talking about spiritual warfare and supernatural enemies, we all respond differently. A few of us will have thought a great deal about angels and demons and will take their reality and their influence very seriously.

But I suspect that the majority of us give them very little thought and have a really hard time separating the Bible's teaching from our own kind of cultural imagination about this.

And it is very dangerous and unhealthy to develop an overactive fascination with demons. However, it is just as ignorant and foolish to dismiss the existence of spiritual powers just because you can't see them, you can't touch them.

[4 : 01] We are far too materialistic these days. And I don't mean consumeristic. I mean that we are now convinced that matter is all that matters.

It's just not the case. Jesus believed in demons. The Apostle Paul who wrote Ephesians believed in demons. Men and women all over the globe who have not been dulled by our over-reliance on our empirical senses as we have believe in the supernatural.

Whether you are a Christian or not, all I am asking tonight is that you keep an open mind. That you practice humility in this area. That you beware of cultural snobbery.

The 20th century preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote two whole volumes on spiritual warfare and he had this to say. I am certain that one of the main causes of the ill state of the church today is the fact that the devil is being forgotten.

We've all become so psychological in our attitudes and thinkings. We're ignorant of this great objective fact, the existence of the devil. And so Ephesians 6 is a gift to us from God.

[5 : 13] After all, imagine for a moment, imagine if you were ignorant that America and Canada were at war. You might drive down to the Peace Arch border crossing, hoping to cross over into Washington State to do a little Christmas shopping.

You arrive at the border. Oh, lucky me, no lineups. This is great. Imagine though your surprise and your horror when suddenly you are arrested as a prisoner of war.

Or worse yet, you're shot at. But you would wish that you had been warned. You would wish that you had been better prepared. That you'd been equipped for the battle.

And that's what Paul's doing here. Paul wants us to beware of our enemy. And he also wants us to be assured that the God who we serve has defeated this enemy in Jesus Christ.

The God who we serve is stronger than sin, stronger than Satan, stronger than death. He has defeated them all. And for this season of warfare between Jesus' first and his final coming, God has given us his protection and his power made available for us so that we might withstand this enemy.

[6 : 26] So I have a very simple structure for us as we take a closer look. First of all, verses 10 to 12, the enemy exposed. And then 13 to 20, equipped for the battle.

Let's have a look at the enemy. Who is our enemy? Look with me at verse 11. Verse 11, 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 rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. The word devil means slanderer.

He's also called Satan, which means the accuser. Jesus calls him the father of lies and a murderer. Verse 12 describes our enemy as the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

And the Greek word that's translated as cosmic powers, it's used to refer to astrology and mythology in reference to all those great powers that people thought controlled the fate of humanity.

[7 : 33] And Paul is saying, no, those aren't just myths. That is actually an enemy that possesses the power to have a worldwide scope.

An enemy like Satan who was able to boast to Jesus, I can offer you the whole kingdom of this world. It's in my control. These are the principalities and powers that are our enemy.

And then Paul says, you need to know what these enemies' strategies are. So again in verse 11, he says, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Schemes. It's the word that we get methods from. And maybe another translation could be strategies of the devil. These strategies which combine both tactical shrewdness with also an ingenious deception.

So here's John Stott. We must not imagine that open persecution and open temptation to sin are the devil's only or even his commonest weapons.

[8 : 42] He prefers to seduce us into compromise and deceive us into error. He is both the bully and the beguiler, using force and fraud. And Satan has two favorite methods.

Accusation and temptation. Accusation works like this. He lies to me, telling me that God will not forgive me for a particular sin that's weighing on my conscience.

He says, you are a screw-up. You're a failure. You should be ashamed to call yourself a follower of Jesus. He knows what you've done. And his grace is not enough to cover that sort of sin.

But temptation, on the other hand, works like this. He lies to me by telling me that God will always forgive me for anything I do. He says, you deserve to be a little bit indulgent.

This is exactly what Jesus died to forgive. He knows that you're not perfect. And his grace will cover a multitude of sins. Accusation and temptation.

[9 : 57] Two different strategies, but always one goal. To destroy our relationship with Jesus by separating us from the life that he offers us through repentance and faith.

And Paul exposes our enemy. And then he reminds us that the Lord Jesus has not left us unprepared for this fight. We're not alone. And so in verses 13 to 20, he equips us for the battle.

Let's have a closer look. Equipped for the battle. Paul gives us two big commands here. Verse 10, be strong.

Verse 11, put on. Be strong and put on. And we can't separate these two commandments as we'll shortly see. So first, be strong.

And you'll notice this is a passive verb. Perhaps a better translation could be, be strengthened. God is the agent here. It's his power which is strengthening us.

[11:00] We're not strengthened merely by the Lord. But it says, in the Lord. Verse 10, we're strengthened in the Lord and in the power of his might.

The strength of his might, excuse me. We are, in other words, empowered in union with our Lord Jesus. Union is attachment.

Union is the closest possible intimacy. The closest possible picture of intimacy that you can experience. It offers us the intimacy and the protection that we need for our enemy.

United with Christ. And what is the source of this power? Where does it come from? Paul tells us this source. By using the same three Greek words for strength that I just read for you in verse 10, as he used already in chapter 1, verse 19.

The same three words. Why does he do that? What's the point? Well, this echo, he wants us to see that the power that we draw upon in our spiritual warfare is the very same power that was at work in Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God.

[12:19] That's amazing, isn't it? The power that rose Jesus from the dead, that ascended him to the right hand of the Father, where he rules over all.

Paul wants us to know that power is the power that's at work in us in spiritual warfare, that he makes available to us. So that we dare not wage war on our own strength, friends.

I mean, I know you're a clever lot. I know you have economic resources and technology, and some of you have many university degrees and career experience.

And for some of you, that's just something that you're hoping to get. You're thinking that will make you clever. But our enemy is not flesh and blood. Cling to the strength which comes from Christ alone.

Depend on it. Need it. Receive it. Paul's second command is put on. Put on the whole armor of God, verse 11.

[13:18] And again, in verse 13, he says put on. Three more times in this passage, he says something similar, which is take up. And if that first command is passive and is dependent on God's power, this second command is deliberately active.

It requires action. You do not have a valet who will dress you. You must put on the armor. And what are we putting on?

It's the armor of God. It comes from God himself. The image here that Paul uses is the full armor of a Roman soldier. And this is a good moment to remind you that Paul's not speaking to you as an individual here.

I know that's the way you like to hear it. I know that's how you read it most of the time. But everything that we heard in those verses is in the plural. It's addressed to the whole church together.

And that makes a lot more sense, though, doesn't it? Because a soldier will never fight alone. A soldier is always fighting shoulder to shoulder with their brothers and sisters in a unit.

[14:30] And that's exactly what we need. We don't put on the armor of God alone. After all, a family that fights together stays together.

Isn't that the saying? Isn't that how it goes? Paul describes six pieces of armor for us here. But all six have one purpose.

A purpose so important that Paul repeats it four times. Look down at verse 11. Put on the whole armor of God. Why? So that you may be able to stand. So that we may stand firm.

Somehow Paul thinks that stability for Christians is important. Imagine that. Stability. Why?

Because wobbly Christians, who have no firm foothold in Christ, are an easy prey for the devil.

Without the gift of God's armor, we will easily be tossed to and fro by the waves that carry about, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

[15:37] That's Ephesians 4.14. Six pieces of armor that will help us stand. So let's have a closer look at these pieces. Beginning in verse 14.

Stand, therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness. So fastening the belt. This is a fantastic Greek expression. Gird up your loins. So this is not a modern day belt that you wear with a pair of jeans. This is a piece of armor that goes underneath of everything else, and it holds it all together. It's an undergarment that gives a soldier freedom of movement and fully prepares him or her for action. And this belt is the belt of what? Of truth. Truth is the foundation. It's the undergarment of our defense against the devil's lies. God's true revelation of promise and pardon in Christ, it silences the devil's accusations and temptations. [16:39] Verse 14 continues, having put on the breastplate of righteousness. And righteousness, when you hear that, it immediately brings to mind the heart of the gospel, which is our justification by faith, the gift of Jesus' perfect righteousness in place of our sinfulness through his death on the cross.

And Paul likely has this salvation story in mind, but I think perhaps he is also encouraging us at the same time to put on the breastplate of holy and righteous living, which is made possible by that new life which we receive from Christ.

So as one commentator puts it, complete pardon of sin and integrity of character both belong to the righteous life. And here they are woven together into an impenetrable male.

Look now at verse 15. And as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. So these are the Roman soldiers' sandals, which were made with a nail that was put into the heel.

To provide strong grip, which would provide a firm foothold when they were in close combat. To keep their feet from sliding in the mud. So perhaps as a paraphrase, you might say for this verse, let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace to give you a firm footing and make you ready to announce the good news of peace to anyone you meet.

[18:17] And there's also a beautiful paradox here. Because right in the midst of this picture of war, we get inner peace, which comes from Christ, the Prince of Peace.

That even in the most violent spiritual warfare, peace is there with us in Christ. 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.

So these flaming darts are those accusations, those temptations that we were talking about. And John Bunyan wrote a famous book called *Pilgrim's Progress* about 400 years ago.

And he describes in that book what it was like for a young Christian to face the accusations of a devil named Apollyon. And I want to read a few lines from their confrontation.

It begins with Apollyon accusing the young Christian. He says, You did faint at first setting out. When you were almost choked in the gulf of despond, you did attempt wrong ways to get rid of your burden of sin, whereas you should have stayed till your prince had taken it off.

[19:31] Then you did sinfully sleep and lose your choice thing. You were also almost persuaded to go back at the sight of the lions. And when you talk of your journey and of what you have heard and seen, you are inwardly desirous of vain glory in all that you say or do.

And how does Christian respond to that? Most of those accusations are true. He did do all those things. All this is true and much more which you have left out.

But the prince whom I serve and honor is merciful and ready to forgive. Besides, these infirmities possessed me in your country, for there I sucked them in. And I have groaned under them, been sorry for them, and have now obtained pardon from my prince.

And then Apollyon broke out into a grievous rage, saying, I am an enemy of this prince. I hate his person, his laws, and his people, and I have come out on purpose to withstand thee.

And then they fight to the death. John Bunyan understood spiritual warfare. And Christian here, he counters all of Apollyon's half-truths, these twistings of what happened, by declaring his faith in the faithful prince, Jesus.

[20:49] And Paul finishes lastly in verse 17, take the helmet of salvation, and last of all, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And let's skip to the sword.

The sword Paul envisions here is the Roman short sword. It's just about this long. And it's only used in very close hand-to-hand combat, where you can see the whites of your enemy's eyes.

Hebrews 4.12 says, The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and

intentions of the heart.

So the Word of God is our weapon in spiritual warfare. And do you remember when Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan?

Do you remember that three times Satan tempts him with a shortcut, a fast track to messianic success? And what did Jesus do three times to counter the devil's attacks?

[21 : 54] He quoted Scripture. He used the sword of the Spirit. And next week, in the collect for the second Sunday of Advent, we will ask God to help us to read, to mark, to learn, and to inwardly digest his word, the Bible.

But tonight I ask you, whose words are going to be on your lips when you face times of accusation? Temptation? Grief and loss?

Anger and frustration? Because it's the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who delights to strike down our enemy with the living and active Word of God. Do you believe that the Spirit of the living God, the Holy Spirit, lives inside you?

That it is He who gives you this armor? That it is He who will never leave your side? Only one question remains for us before we close.

How do we put on the armor of God? How do we put it on? The answer is right there for us in verse 18. Praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication.

[23 : 16] To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. Prayer. We put on the armor of God through day-by-day commitment to prayer.

Prayer is what undergirds our spiritual battle as an expression of our complete dependence upon God. What is Paul's hope for our prayer life? Well, four times he uses the word all.

So he says, at all times, with all prayer and supplication, with all perseverance, supplication for all the saints. And if you're like me, then you pray sometimes, with some prayer and some supplication with some degree of perseverance for some of the saints.

But imagine for a moment what it could mean to replace the word some in your prayer life with the word all in all of these expressions.

Imagine what a richness and beauty in prayer would open up for us. There's nothing sentimental about the collect for the first Sunday of Advent, is there?

[24 : 33] And thank God for that. Because there's nothing sentimental about spiritual warfare that we're thrust into when we love and follow Jesus. Jesus. And we need to know our enemy, his character and his strategies.

And most of all, we need to be reminded to be strengthened and to put on the armor of God. And I want to ask if you would finish with me by praying again that colic that we prayed together.

If you turn to it in your bulletin, let's pray it aloud together again. And let these words digest and stay with you this week. Let's pray. Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility, that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen. That's a good one. on