

The Breastplate of Righteousness

15th October 2023

Last week, Bernard introduced our sermon theme of being strong in the LORD, teaching us of the need to put on the whole armour of God. This week we are looking at one feature of this armour: the breastplate of righteousness.

Paul used the image of armour at a time when the Roman Empire was dominant, so this was an effective way of teaching about the need for spiritual protection. The breastplate protected the heart, lungs and so on. Whilst many injuries could be survived, damage to the heart or lungs would prove fatal. This is how seriously Paul wanted believers to take this: righteousness is a critical part of our spiritual protection and defence against Satan.

So what is righteousness? It is being right in the sight of God.

It should be straight-forward: God tells us what to do and we do it and everyone lives happily ever after in complete peace, joy and freedom. There are two problems. Firstly, mankind generally prefers to go its own way, doing its own thing, submitting to no one – especially not God. Secondly, there are angels who rebelled against God, including Satan, who want to turn us away from God and His ways.

The story goes like this: God created a perfect world, with two perfect people to live in it. Those people were called Adam and Eve. His plan was for them to live in relationship with each other and with Him, fully satisfied and fully alive in the garden He had made for them. There was just one rule in place: Adam and Eve could eat from all the trees in the Garden of Eden except for one. God told them not to eat from that because if they ate its fruit, they would come to know good *and evil*. Adam and Eve knew all about the goodness of God, but they had no concept of evil. Just one rule that existed to protect the goodness that they knew with God. One rule that existed to prevent them from knowing suffering and death. One rule that kept them in perfect, close, satisfying relationship with God and with each other.

One day, a serpent suggested to Eve that she eat the fruit of the one tree that God had forbidden them to eat from. Eve did so and gave some to Adam. They disobeyed God and evil was able to enter their glorious world, marring it and separating them from perfect goodness.

Adam and Eve knew without doubt that God existed. They knew His goodness in His character and in all that He had given them. But they did not recognise His goodness was also at work in His rule-giving. They did not see it as something that protected them and the life they had.

By the time we come to this passage in Exodus, evil had caused havoc in the world. The people of Israel had been in slavery in Egypt, a clear example of an oppressive and abusive rule-

giving. The people did not cry out to the gods of Egypt for help, of which there were many, but to the Almighty God of their fathers. God heard them and sent Moses and his brother Aaron to lead Israel out of slavery to freedom.

Pharaoh did not want to let Israel go, so God sent plague after plague upon Egypt, each one demonstrating clearly who the one true God was. These began with the waters of the Nile being impacted – the river that brought life to Egypt. Then He impacted the land, the air, the livestock, the crops and then caused darkness to fall on the land. In all of these plagues, the gods of Egypt could do nothing – they were shown to be powerless.

God brought the people out of Egypt and to the Red Sea; miraculously parting the waters in their presence so that they would see His deliverance firsthand. In the desert on the other side, He turned bitter water into fresh drinking water, brought water out of rocks and provided food each day. Then God brought them to camp at Mount Sinai and gave the people of Israel this message through Moses:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Mea holy nation’ Ex. 19:4-6 (NIV)

And the people agreed to this. They agreed to a covenant relationship with God in which they would follow His ways. In response, God would provide for their needs and protect them. This agreement was based on the fact that the people of Israel knew without doubt that this God existed and that He was the one who had heard and answered their prayers for deliverance from slavery. They had seen Him at work on their behalf and they had heard His voice. God had shown them that He was worth following.

The people of Israel had agreed to be a holy people before God. In other words, they were to be set apart from other nations by going God’s way instead of their own. God gave ten rules that were key to living rightly before Him. When we call them the Ten Commandments, it makes it sound like they are some kind of arbitrary law that is there for the sake of it; just to make people follow oppressive and boring rules or to spoil people’s fun and freedom. But it’s not like that at all. It is all about agreeing not to do things that mess our lives up. These rules flow from God’s heart of goodness and love for us; a love that wants to protect us from Satan’s evil.

The commandments start like this:

- 1.You shall have no other gods.
- 2.You shall not make or worship a carved image of any created thing.
- 3.You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

In a world where having multiple gods and goddesses was common, God required His people to worship, honour and serve Him alone because He was the only true, real, living God. As the people had seen God in action on their behalf, it would be entirely fair to expect that they would not want to worship powerless idols made from metal or wood. They knew that only one God was needed, and that was the Living God who delivered them from slavery.

4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (ie set apart from work days).

How about that for a law? You must have a day of rest each week! This is so that we can focus fully on reconnecting with the God who brings us life, peace, joy and perspective on all that is going on. Take a day out of the normal run of things to rejoice in Him and remember how awesome He is.

5. Honour your father and your mother.

6. You shall not murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness against others.

10. You shall not covet what other people have.

This shows how life had changed from the perfection of Eden. God had to establish laws about murder, theft, envy, deceit because mankind did not automatically turn away from these things that cause chaos. Does it seem strange to have envy in the list with murder? Envy does not lead to life. Envy causes us to become dissatisfied with what we have and can lead to us taking something that is not ours to take. Remember, Eve was perfectly content with the goodness that she had until Satan pointed out something desirable that was not hers to take.

At Mount Sinai, the people of Israel found the presence of God so awesome that they preferred Moses to be a go-between for them. So Moses would go up the mountain to meet with God, hear what He had to say, and then bring the message down for the people. Whilst he was gone, the people of Israel rebelled, going back on their agreement with God and Aaron, the priest, helped them do it. Their words to Aaron were, "Come, make us gods..." (plural).

There was no question that these would be anything other than manmade objects that they would call gods, worship and take with them as holy objects. Having made an idol, they then announced that it was this that had brought them out of Egypt. They claimed that this thing that had not existed before that day had delivered them from slavery, when they knew that this was not true.

Why did they do this? I think it was because idols do not offer covenant relationship – or anything at all! They have not saved us from anything, so we do not owe them anything. Idols

cannot hold any opinions, require us to change our behaviour, instruct us or tell us things we don't want to hear. Idols do not inspire humble worship simply because their presence is so glorious and awesome. Of course not: this was something that they had made with bits of metal. They preferred to worship this inanimate work of their own hands, rather than the Living God who had created all the stars and planets in the universe with a word. When Moses returned to the people with the Ten Commandments in stone he,

...saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies. Ex. 32:25

We are designed to worship God in the Holy Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). Worshipping something they had made was based in deceit and certainly not acting in the flow of God's Holy Spirit. This act caused them to run wild; to lose all sense of dignity and purpose. But the consequence of their choice was more than that, as we read in Psalm 106:19-20:

They made a calf ... and worshipped the moulded image. Thus they changed their glory into the image of an ox that eats grass.

Instead of reflecting God's glory, as they were created to do, they reflected the image of an animal.

We cannot stand and withstand evil when we are in rebellion against God. We can only stand and withstand evil when we are positioned in and clothed in righteousness.

We might not have literal golden idols in our homes and churches. But sadly there are cases of unrighteous behaviour by people who claim to be Christians – often in the areas of relationship or financial malpractice. What we say must be backed up by our behaviour and life choices to the best of our ability. Yes, we live under grace through Christ, but we still need to choose righteousness over rebellion.

God knows that we cannot live in perfect righteousness. The apostle Paul got deeply frustrated that he wanted to obey God at all times, yet he couldn't. (Romans 7:15 and 19) We are human so, despite our best intentions, we still mess up. Because God knew that, He put another rescue plan into action. Having delivered Israel from slavery and into freedom, God then delivered all people from spiritual slavery and into spiritual freedom through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus lived on Earth for 33 years and He alone was fully righteous and without sin. He allowed Himself to be executed on the cross, allowed that curse to come upon Him, so that He could take the punishment for our sins and defeat sin and death. He rose to life again victorious over Satan. When we accept Jesus as our Saviour, we recognise that we have sinned and that He took the punishment for those sins so that we could live in spiritual freedom.

As we follow Him, setting our eyes on all that He is and does, then we reflect Him as we were created to do. We regain that family likeness to our Heavenly Father. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, saying this:

... where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NIV)

The Bible teaches us that it is like we have a veil over our eyes that stops us seeing the truth of God, but the Holy Spirit removes this from us so that we can understand what is really going on in life. So many people would say that there is no such thing as sin and that there is no need for a Saviour, but the Holy Spirit reveals to us that sin is real and yes, we absolutely do need the Saviour. The Holy Spirit reveals to us that there is a better life to be had in Christ, both here on Earth and then eternally with Him. He brings into our lives the gifts of the kingdom, such as joy, peace, forgiveness, grace, goodness, faithfulness, and so on.

Through accepting Christ, we receive His righteousness. Now, when we sin, we can return to Jesus in repentance – saying that we know we sinned and that we have resolved to turn away from that sin and be restored to righteousness. Because He dealt with our sin at the Cross, Jesus pardons us and sends that sin away as far as east is from west (see Psalm 103:11-12). When Satan accuses us of sin, bringing condemnation and guilt because we messed up, we proclaim that we are washed clean of that sin by the blood of Jesus and we stand firm covered in the righteousness of Christ.

Paul wrote this to the believers in Rome (Romans 5:17-19),

¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, **how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!**

¹⁸ Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The unleashing of evil upon the world that happened through Eve and Adam was dealt with by Jesus Christ. One day He will return and Satan will be cast into a pit once and for all. To paraphrase a line from a film, 'there is no throne waiting for Satan. There is no version of this where Satan comes out on top.' God's righteousness prevails. And God will make all things new and perfect once more. Evil will be no more: no more sickness, abuse, grief, deceit,

depression or despair. We won't be singing hymns on fluffy clouds in eternity, but living in and worshipping the perfect goodness of God in a fully restored world.

Conclusion

We have looked at a picture of a Roman breastplate, but here is a picture from the coronation this year. These men and women bear the insignia of King Charles. Their allegiance is to him as their King and commander in chief. They wear their ceremonial armour, including highly reflective breastplates.

When we choose to accept that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and we welcome Him as our Lord and Saviour, we wear the insignia of the Living God.

We choose to promise allegiance to Him because we know that He alone is worthy of our worship and lifelong service.

We choose to obey Him as our Commander-in-Chief, because we know that His ways lead to life, both now and eternally.

We choose to stand firm against evil until that day when Jesus returns, so we put on the protection He has given us. We put on that breastplate of righteousness so that every time our God looks at us, He sees that we honour Him in our behaviour and that we bear the righteousness of Christ.

In response, God calls us His own beloved children and opens up the riches of His kingdom to us. He pours out the abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness upon us.

At the end of our Bible passage, Moses called upon the people of Israel to make this choice again:

“Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him. Ex. 32:26

If you have not made that choice yet, think about it now. Hear the voice of our Saviour calling to you, “come to Me.” Accept that gift of life and freedom that He offers.

Let us pray. Living God, we thank You for Your abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness. We acknowledge You alone as our God and choose to live in Your ways of life and light. We welcome the work of the Holy Spirit in us to keep us alert, equipped and able to stand and withstand the evil in the world around us. May we reflect Your glory so that others will choose to follow You and receive the life that only You can give. Amen.