

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

Extraordinary Power

The more I think about it the more I am convinced that God takes ordinary things and transforms them . We so often look for the spectacular. We so often make the mistake of thinking that victorious Christian living is only found in the spectacular. We so often pray for the spectacular, we so often seek the spectacular and because of this we so often miss the extraordinary in the ordinary. And it is here, I am more and more convinced, that God does most of his work.

God does most of his extraordinary work in the lives of ordinary people just like me and you and he does it day in and day out, week in and week out, month in and month out, year in and year out. Everything we've read in Ephesians points to the extraordinary work of God in the lives of ordinary people. God has chosen ordinary people – before the creation of the world. You have always been on his mind; from eternity past to eternity future; he loves you because he loves you because he loves you.... You are precious, special, loved, accepted, chosen. Everyone who believes is a child of the almighty, all powerful, living God. He makes us his own, we have been wonderfully and graciously forgiven, we are free to live as God intended without guilt or regret. We can live at peace – peace with God. We are free to be ourselves and we don't have to strive to be anything that God has not created us to be. We have all this in Christ – all through the giving of Christ on the cross, and we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Everything I've just described we have read about in the first three chapters of Ephesians. There is no place that God's blessing, his grace and his mercy cannot reach us. Because the presence of God is as close as the air we breathe, the whole of life – it's good bits and it's bad bits, can be hallowed when found in the encompassing sphere of every divine blessing. And so, because we live in the reality of the kingdom of God – which is everywhere his presence is, we can be blessed in all things and in all situations. And we have the incomparably great power, the power that raised Christ from the dead, at work in our lives - that is the gift of the Holy Spirit with which we were sealed. All this is wonderfully and fantastically true for everyone who comes to faith in Christ. It is truly extraordinary that God would do this for ordinary, fallen people like me and you, and that in ordinary fallen people, God works an extraordinary work of transformation. And when he does he raises us to sit with Christ in the heavenly realms.

Now, friends, that is the extraordinary in the ordinary: the extraordinary work of God in ordinary people. And Paul really wants us to grasp the significance of this extraordinary work of God. That's why he prays, at the end of chapter 3 that we may know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Because, in order to live well in the world, we must grasp the extraordinary work God has done for us and works in us. As he closes his letter Paul reminds us again of how we are to live and he

reminds us that we live in the midst of a battle this is constantly raging around us and in order to be victorious we must take hold of the extraordinary work that God has already done in our ordinary lives.

Ephesians 6 v 10 : Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Friends, we must be strong in all that God has done for us and, as Paul has already prayed twice, we must recognize that it is the power that raised Christ from the dead, that is at work within us. We must rely on the extraordinary power of God at work in the lives of ordinary people like you and me.

Ephesians 6 v 11-12 : 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.

Friends, there is a real, powerful battle going on that is set on pulling us away from God. We must not be naive about this, we must not pretend it is otherwise but... but... we are fighting, not people, but the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. These are led by Satan – the one who comes to kill, steal and destroy. While this battle is real and raging, we must remember the extraordinary work of God in our lives for we have been raised with Christ, and seated with him in the heavenly realms. And he is seated in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every title that can be given, both in the present age, and in the one to come. (chapter 1 v 21) So we already have the victory in Christ! However, until Christ returns, that battle still rages. No matter what the enemy may throw at us, no matter how he may try to outwit us and outgun us, no matter what sinister tactics he may use to plot our downfall, we do not need to worry when we have the Lord on our side. “We fight from the place of victory because Calvary and the empty tomb make all the difference.”¹

Ephesians 6 v 13 – 18 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, 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 saints.

Paul tells us to put on the full armour of God. If we want to take full advantage of the extraordinary power that is at work in us, then we need to use the armour that he has graciously given us. To put on has the meaning of permanence - this is not something we take off! This is something we always carry with us – we don't just save it for the tough times, the devil is far too cunning and clever for us to live like that! Only if we put on the armour permanently will we be able to avoid giving the devil a foothold that he so eagerly desires.

Now, just before we look at the armour at our disposal a word about the imagery here. Paul uses images here of a soldier, a warrior that has roots in the Old Testament especially Isaiah and specifically as God as the warrior King. The point is this: the armour and weapons that we have at our disposal in this

battle, are none other than the actual armour and weapons of God himself. So when Paul says put on a full armour of God, he most likely means: “the armour that is God’s own, that belongs to him and that he now shares with his people in Christ”.²

The belt of truth was a leather garment worn around the waist that protected the thighs. This was put on last, other clothing was tucked into it to give freedom of movement. We are, if we are to be ready for battle, and withstand the attacks of the enemy to continually act truthfully and with integrity. We do this only with a continuing commitment to the truth of the word of God, the gospel of salvation. The breastplate of righteousness: the breastplate covered the heart from swords, darts, arrows or daggers. For us, our breastplate is to live right. To know that something is right and not to do it, leaves a gaping hole in our armour. If we cultivate righteousness it is the wisest way to resist any temptation the devil can throw at us. A Roman soldier would have worn sandals that were strong while giving him flexibility – to move quickly and over long distances. Part of the way to defeat the work of the devil is to proclaim the gospel of peace: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52 v 7)

The shield of faith: the Romans were famous for their shields which could be used to protect individuals, or joined together to protect a group of soldiers. It is faith that relies entirely on the Lord and on the extraordinary work he has already worked for us and in us which can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. The flaming arrows will come in many different forms – but they will be constant! Paul has prayed that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith and it is this faith that knows God remains faithful to his people always, and his power and his presence are always with us. It is this faith that enables us to stand our ground.

The helmet of salvation is to keep salvation very much in mind! This is the reminder to live in the perspective of the Kingdom – and eternity. The war has been won, even though the battle rages, but the battle will not last forever and one day the kingdom will fully come. We are wonderfully saved, we are being day by day wonderfully saved, and we will be, one day, gloriously saved. We must make sure we take this gift into battle for our protection, for the Lord goes with us. The sword of the spirit which is the word of God - we cannot win victories without the word of God. We go with Christ, and proclaim his word, and watch the power of the spirit at work. The great power of the spirit in the extraordinary transforming word of God must never be forgotten by all of us who are engaged in the ongoing battle of this age. God has spoken and continues to speak as his word is proclaimed.

Ephesians 6 v 18-20 : 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 saints. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

We cannot hope to do well in the battle without prayer. It is a necessity.

“It is perhaps one of the strangest anomalies of the modern church that while it often spends much time talking of how evil the world is and how dreadful society has become, the same church spends little or

no time in prayer. This letter has shown us Paul's personal commitment to prayer for this church, but in these last verses Paul has shown how vital the prayer of the congregation is as it battles the spiritual forces of evil. It seems so very sad that many churches and many Christians see little need for corporate, intercessory prayer. Some Christians do spend time in their own personal prayers, but often these tend to be simple prayers asking God for this and that. Such prayers are important, but they should not be allowed to become more important or given more priority than those prayers about the big issues, about how we live for Christ, about how we resist evil and fight the fight the Lord has commanded.

If this is true at the personal level, it is also true at the congregational level. How few people treat congregational or whole church prayer as a necessity. Yet we are to 'be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.' I have been in countries where Christians have put themselves in great personal danger while gathering for prayer that they regard as essential to the church's survival. Why should such people treat prayer as so vital while congregations in Britain, the United States and across the western world so often ignore this indispensable Christian activity? The only cost to these people would be a little less time to eat dinner, coming home from work a little earlier, or a little less time with the family watching TV! The result of the lack of prayer is everywhere to be seen, for the spiritual forces of evil are at work in our midst. Consumerism, materialism, individualism and the other gods of our age seem to have influenced our Christian thinking far more deeply than we imagine. We shall only 'keep alert' properly when we pray together."³

Paul ends his letter, where he began – with grace and peace. Perhaps we can make this end a beginning, to walk in the grace of God that he has lavished on us. To realise we do not need to look for, seek, desire or even pray for the spectacular, because God has already worked the extraordinary in the lives of ordinary people – you and me. We really are the extraordinary in the ordinary – the people of God, together, through whom he will do most of his work.

Preached by Rev Ian Phillips at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 27th April 2008.

1. Sam Gordon: "The Genius of Grace: the message of Ephesians", Ambassador Publications 2003 page 385
2. Paul Gardener: "Ephesians: Encouragement and Joy in Christ", Christian Focus Publications 2007 page 168
3. Gardener: page177