

The Helmet of Salvation. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 19 February 2012.

As most of you will have guessed, our reading this morning comes from Ephesians chapter 6. We break in at verse 14.

Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with readiness to preach the gospel of peace.

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

It won't take us long to get our bearings. Against the dark and sinister background of the menacing spirit forces arrayed against us, we have been considering the various parts of the spiritual armour which God has provided for us.

This week we have reached the fifth piece of this armour, 'the helmet of salvation'.

I have read that Roman soldiers would *not* usually *put on* their helmets until they were on the battlefield. Apparently, the helmets would be slung on a strap for long marches. Putting on the helmet usually marked the beginning of the battle.

The word translated 'take', which differs from that rendered 'take up' in verses 13 and 16, carries the idea of receiving or accepting something from someone else. Certainly, that which the helmet pictures here – namely, the possession of our salvation – comes to us as a gift bestowed by God.

It is worth noting also that the helmet is spoken of as being received before the sword ... which makes extremely good sense, because the soldier is pictured by Paul as already grasping his shield with one hand. If he took the sword next, he would have no hand free to put on his helmet.

In Paul's day, the helmet was regarded as an essential item of a soldier's equipment. Nor was this anything new. We read of military helmets both in the period between the Old and New Testaments¹ and in the Old Testament² ... not only in the writings of the prophets, but as far back as the days of King Saul – over 1,000 years before Paul gave us our reading for this morning.³

And I would like to think that the helmet of salvation we are to consider this morning will do us more good in our conflict than the helmet of bronze did the Philistine champion in his conflict – of whichever kind Goliath's helmet actually was.⁴

I guess that one important rule in any military engagement is 'Keep Your Head' – which the big man with the big mouth conspicuously failed to do following David's 'stunning' victory over him!

The helmet's use in Paul's day was to protect the head from a blow by a war-club, battle-axe, or the lethal broadsword commonly used in the warfare then. This was not the much smaller sword mentioned later in our verse, but was a large two-handed, double-edged sword measuring three to four feet in length ... often carried by cavalymen, who would swing at the heads of enemy soldiers either to split them or to remove them! And, needless to say, a battle-axe whirled around skilfully could really spoil your day.

Several of the pieces of the armour listed in our passage have become obsolete in terms of more recent military tactics. The sword is replaced with an assault rifle – the breastplate with a bullet-proof vest. The battle shield is discarded without any replacement. But the helmet is still with us, and, although very different both in appearance and in material to that worn by the ancient Romans, it still forms an essential part of a soldier's equipment.⁵ My cousin Norman, who fought in many battles in France in the last World War, tells me that he owes his life to his helmet when a German sniper picked off Norman's colleague and then shot Norman in the head. And there are many 'more recent' Normans!

But our main task this morning is to understand what Paul meant by 'the Helmet of Salvation', and to see what it means for each of us to 'take' and to use this to protect ourselves.

I hardly need tell you that the main – if not the only – function of the military helmet is to protect the head, and it is highly likely therefore that the apostle has in mind that which defends and protects the believer's mind – his thought life – and that against, as the context make clear, 'the devil' and his formidable army – with its various ranks and levels of command. And I have to confess that the very words 'the world-rulers of this darkness' make me shudder.

And I hardly need to stress that 'the enemy' (as our Lord described him⁶) is no fool, and he makes it his business to target the minds of men, for he knows that there – in the mind of man – lies the most important battlefield on earth. As 'the god of this age' he is currently engaged in blinding the minds of unbelievers,⁷ and, as 'the serpent' he is currently engaged in deceiving and in seducing the minds of believers away from pure and single-hearted devotion to the Lord Jesus.⁸

It has been well said that the one who failed to defend his own head will surely aim to wound ours!

Make no mistake, a great deal of the war we were engaged in takes place between our ears ... it is often there that spiritual battles are either won or lost.

The helmet with which God has provided us is said to be 'the helmet of *salvation*'.

The apostle is, in fact, borrowing the image from Isaiah 59 ... verse 17. If I understand the passage correctly, Isaiah speaks there of the Lord's intervention at the second advent, when, in spite of Israel's wayward and sinful condition, and though Himself astonished that there was no-one to be found who would mediate between Him and His nation,⁹ and, with no-one else to come to their aid,¹⁰ He (the Lord) arrays Himself in His armour to go forth into battle against those who have oppressed them ... taking vengeance on His foes, and bringing 'salvation' to those of His people who 'turn from transgression' ... coming as their great Redeemer to Zion¹¹ ... a point which Paul picked up towards the close of Romans 11 as a biblical proof of the full and final restoration of Israel.¹²

In a very real sense, therefore, 'the helmet of salvation' can be said to be part of 'the armour of God'. Although the apostle uses the expression to describe, not that which is worn by God Himself when securing salvation, but that salvation which He freely gives to His people ... the conscious enjoyment of which protects them when engaged in conflict with the mighty Overlord of evil and his minions.

And 'salvation' is certainly a key word in our Bibles. I have counted 167 references to the words 'save' or 'salvation' – not to speak of 24 references to the word 'Saviour' – in the *New Testament* alone. Needless to say, we do not have time today even to properly scratch the surface of such a vast – and magnificent – subject.

The Precious Seed publication, 'Treasury of Bible Doctrine', included an article by Grace Wilkins's father, Mr E. W. Humphreys – which expounded the subject of salvation under seven headings.¹³

For this morning, I need to be more selective than Mr Humphreys, and will focus on three phases of our salvation – which we might well describe as a past event, a present experience, and a future hope

That is, the true Christian can say, 'I *have been* saved, I *am being* saved, and I *shall yet be* saved'.¹⁴ This embraces, broadly speaking, the biblical subjects of justification, sanctification (practical sanctification, that is), and glorification. For this 'great salvation' not only saves from sin's *penalty*, but from its *power*, and, one day, from its very *presence*. As far as we, God's people, are concerned, the Lord Jesus has borne sin's penalty, is breaking its power, and will banish its presence. We might well summarise our salvation, from its commencement to its consummation, under the headings of our *initial*, our *progressive*, and our *final* salvation.

And, as we shall discover, each of these aspects function well in protecting the believer's mind from the Enemy's attack – whether that attack takes the form of temptation to sin – as it once did in the case of Ananias and Sapphira¹⁵ – or the form of doubt and discouragement.

First, then, I *have been* saved.

And *this*, God's word makes clear, was by grace alone.

As Eddie Donald reminded some of us this past Monday, the apostle Peter made his convictions clear at the so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 – namely that both Jews and Gentiles are saved on exactly the same ground ... that of the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Not that I would wish in any way to downplay the riches of God's mercy demonstrated in our salvation. Far from it ... nor that this salvation is received and experienced only by personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

This initial aspect of salvation is mine by believing, not by achieving ... by atonement, not by attainment. This initial aspect of salvation is complete. It is an act, and not a process.

By grace and through faith, I have been taken off Death Row.¹⁶

The famous Spanish artist Pablo Picasso was virtually unknown when he painted his portrait of American writer Gertrude Stein in 1906. Picasso gave the portrait to Miss Stein because, as the artist himself recalled with a smile, at that time in his career "the difference between a gift and a sale was negligible". Some years later, the portrait attracted the interest of millionaire art collector Dr. Albert Barnes, who asked Miss Stein how much she had paid Picasso for it. "Nothing", she replied. "He gave it to me". Dr. Barnes was amazed that such a priceless work of art could have been a gift.

But this morning, we speak of something of infinitely more value ... of 'eternal salvation'¹⁷ ... and yet ... alas ... we easily cease to be amazed that this comes to us as a free gift from God Himself.¹⁸

But not only have I *been* saved ... I am *being* saved – not now an act, but an on-going process.

By the unceasing and untiring intercession of my ever-living Lord. I am being saved, practically, from the dominating power of indwelling sin, from a selfish, wasted and fruitless life, and from ending up a spiritual shipwreck.

But not only have I *been* saved ... not only am I *being* saved ... but there is a sense in which I shall yet *be* saved'.

It is to this that Paul alludes in Romans 13, when he told the saints at Rome that their salvation was nearer than when they first believed.¹⁹ For this final instalment of 'salvation', Peter says towards the opening of the first chapter of his first letter, is 'ready to be revealed in the last time'.²⁰ This is the firmly anchored hope which is set before us.²¹

Yes, in terms of a past event, I *have been* saved ... in terms of a present experience, I *am being* saved, and in terms of a future hope, I *shall yet be* saved.

And these three phases of my salvation match extremely well with the three appearances of our Lord Jesus listed by the writer to the Hebrews in the closing section of chapter 9. For there we read, with reference to the past, that 'He *has appeared* to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself' ... with reference to the present, that He 'now' *appears* 'in the presence of God for us' ... and, with reference to the future, that one day 'He *will appear* a second time', not then to deal with our sin – because He put that away once for all at His first coming – but to bring us into the enjoyment of the final instalment of our salvation.

What a joy to have the assurance that I *have been* saved because He came into the world and died for me.

And what a joy to have the assurance that I *am being* saved because the risen, glorified Lord represents me before God as my High Priest,²² and, if I sin, acts as my Advocate, my Counsel for the Defence, with the Father.²³

'If a man sins against the Lord, *who* will intercede for him?', Eli once asked his immoral sons.²⁴ I can tell you, Eli.

And, frankly, not one of us has any real idea how much we each owe to our Lord's present – and unfinished – ministry on our behalf.

But one day He will save me, not only from sin's penalty and power, but from its very presence. For, at His return, He will transport me away (spirit, soul and body) from this vale of temptation and sin – and that, for ever.²⁵

Truly, 'Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait; the sky, not the grave, is our goal'. Then we shall be like Him ... no longer with the capacity to sin and to grieve Him. And what a day – what a glorious day – that will be!

Personally, I find the concluding lines of C. S. Lewis's 'The Chronicles of Narnia' very moving:

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.²⁶

But we are not there yet!

And meanwhile you and I have the devil and his hosts to contend with. But that is just where my 'salvation' comes in. It is my helmet to ward off his blows.

For, when I find my mind assailed by these – his blows, I reach for my 'Salvation Helmet'. If he reminds me of my past failures and sins, I remind myself that *I have been, and am, saved* ... and that my salvation rests foursquare on the finished work of Christ.²⁷

And if he seeks to discourage me with problems around and with the hardness of the way, suggesting that I should throw in the towel and pack it all in – that its really isn't worth fighting any more²⁸ – again I take my 'Salvation Helmet' from God's hand, and remind myself that I *am being saved* by the life, the ministry and the intercession of my Lord Jesus, and that, in spite of his (the devil's) fiercest efforts, according to the word of Him who cannot lie, I *will be saved* – forever then beyond his reach and snares. No matter how hot the battle, we know that ultimate victory is sure.²⁹

Paul himself looked forward with eager anticipation to *that day* when, his warfare accomplished and the noise of battle forever past, he would trade in his soldier's 'helmet of salvation' for the victor's 'crown of righteousness'.³⁰ As Grace's father wrote in his article: 'The believer ... is kept going by the glorious hope of the wonderful future that is just ahead of him'.³¹

Incredible as it may sound, some historians claim that the beginning of the downfall of the Roman empire came in part when their legions stopped wearing their helmets. Edward Gibbon, author of the well-known work, 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' noted that 'relaxation of discipline and the disuse of exercise rendered the soldiers unable to survive the fatigue of service'. 'They therefore complained', he said, 'of the weight of their armour, and obtained permission' to lay aside some key parts of it, notably, their helmets.³²

Whether or not, as Gibbon asserted, such 'indolence may be considered as the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire', our text this morning makes it very clear that *our* neglect of our God-given 'helmet' – of our conscious enjoyment of our 'salvation' – past, present and future – such neglect will leave us hopelessly exposed to the attacks of the forces of evil on our thought-life.

May God help us to live in the conscious enjoyment of our salvation – in all its aspects – not just today, but every day. It is our spiritual helmet.

Footnotes

¹ 1 Macc. 6. 35.

² 2 Chron. 26. 14; Jer. 46. 4 (Egypt); Ezek. 27. 10 (Edom).

³ 1 Sam. 17. 5, 38. The emphasis of Israelite armies was on offensive rather than defensive weaponry – e.g. sword and spear.

⁴ 1 Sam. 17. 4-5, 50-51.

⁵ According to a report by the United States Army, over half of the American Soldiers who fought in World War II, would have been killed if they didn't wear their helmets!

⁶ Matt. 13. 39; Luke 10. 19.

⁷ 2 Cor. 4. 4.

⁸ 2 Cor. 11. 3, with Rev. 12. 9.

⁹ Isa. 59. 16.

¹⁰ 'His own arm brought salvation', Isa. 59. 16.

¹¹ Isa. 59. 20.

¹² Rom. 11. 26.

¹³ E. W. Humphrey, 'Seven-fold Salvation', Treasury of Bible Doctrine, pages 319-322.

¹⁴ The story is told of Regius Professor of Divinity, Brooke Foss Westcott, who was approached at Cambridge by a student to ask if he was saved. 'Ah,' said Westcott, 'a very good question. But tell me: do you mean...?' - and then he mentioned three passive participles of the Greek verb 'to save', indicating that his answer would depend on which of the three the student had in mind. 'I know I have been saved,' he said (except that he used the Greek forms, which are here put in italics in English); I believe I am being saved, and I hope by the grace of God that I shall be saved.' Salvation has a past, a present and future reference. (Bruce, FF. The Work of Jesus, page 137.)

¹⁵ Acts 5. 1-10.

¹⁶ Eph. 2. 1-5.

¹⁷ Heb. 5. 9.

¹⁸ Rom. 6. 23.

¹⁹ Rom. 13. 11.

²⁰ 1 Pet. 1. 5; cf. Rom. 5. 9; 1 Thess. 5. 9.

²¹ Heb. 6. 18-19.

²² Heb. 9. 24.

²³ 1 John 2. 1.

²⁴ 1 Sam. 2. 25.

²⁵ 1 Thess. 4. 15-17.

²⁶ As one preacher said, 'There will be gifts under the Christmas tree that none of us have ever have dreamed of'.

²⁷ And I remind the one who whispers accusingly about my unsavoury past about his unenviable future!

²⁸ As Elijah of old on one occasion, 1 Kings 19.

²⁹ Spiritual warfare "produces a sense of weariness or of tiredness; so much so that the Christian sometimes feels like giving up the entire battle!" Without the assurance of salvation past, present and future to fortify him he might easily give up the fight. But salvation in part already experienced and enjoyed, and in whole promised, will help us to hold our head erect in calm confidence.

³⁰ 2 Tim. 4. 7-8. No team ever gave up, no matter how bad the reverses, if they were confident of victory in the end. A soldier would not fight well without a hope of victory. But sustained by his hope, what has the Christian to dread? Rom. 16. 22.

³¹ E. W. Humphrey, Treasury of Bible Doctrine, page 322. 'Hope has an eye that can see heaven on a cloudy day', William Gurnall, 'Christian in Complete Armour', volume 2, page 147.

³² In Edward Gibbon's great work, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, he describes how the Roman army became lax in discipline and exercise. "It is the just and important observation of Vegetius, that the infantry was invariably covered with defensive armour, from the foundation of the city to the reign of the emperor Gratian. The relaxation of discipline, and the disuse of exercise, rendered the soldiers less able, and less willing, to support the fatigues of the service; they complained of the weight of the armour, which they seldom wore: and they successively obtained the permission of laying aside both their cuirasses (breastplates) and their helmets. The heavy weapons of their ancestors, the short sword, and the formidable pilum, which had subdued the world, insensibly dropped from their feeble hands. As the use of the shield is incompatible with that of the bow, they reluctantly marched into the field; condemned to suffer either the pain of wounds, or the ignominy of flight, and always disposed to prefer the more shameful alternative. The cavalry of the Goths, the Huns, and the Alani, had felt the benefits, and adopted the use, of defensive armour; and, as they excelled in the management of missile weapons, they easily overwhelmed the naked and trembling legions, whose heads and breasts were exposed, without defence, to the arrows of the barbarians. The loss of armies, the destruction of cities, and the dishonour of the Roman name, ineffectually solicited the successors of Gratian to restore the helmets and cuirasses of the infantry. The enervated soldiers abandoned their own, and the public defence; and the pusillanimous indolence may be considered as the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire." (Vol. III, chapter XXVII (last paragraph)). <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/gibbon/03/daf03005.htm>