

Ephesians 6:10-20

Eph. 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench 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.

Eph. 6:18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

## PREPARING FOR BATTLE

I remember going to a small church conference years ago. (They called it a Wee Kirk conference to give it that Scottish, Presbyterian flair.) And ironically, the keynote speaker at this conference was Clayton Bell, the pastor of the largest church in our denomination at that time.

I thought I had it figured out. Pastor Bell would speak on evangelism and teach us how to turn our wee kirks into mega kirks. But, that wasn't what he talked about at all. Instead, he read from our passage for today that exhorts the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God. He told us that our mission in the church was to prepare people for battle. He said that the Christian life was no less than an all out struggle with the forces of evil.

He said that in such a world our first job was not to be successful but to be faithful. In a world that is hostile to the Christian faith we had to be prepared for battle. I remember thinking that this all seemed a bit paranoid and melodramatic. We might have some problems in our community, but are we really in a battle with the forces of evil?

But, with more experience I have come to agree with Pastor Bell. I may not be able to explain it, but I know it's true.

According to our passage for today, we are in a battle. We are in a battle with the devil. Paul said that in the final analysis our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our struggle is against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

This passage was a favorite among the Reformers and the Puritans. As I have often said, in those days theology was a full contact sport. People were persecuted and killed for their faith, and sometimes it was done by people who claimed to be Christians. No wonder they were anxious to put on the full armor of God. They needed it.

Take Martin Luther for example. Luther in his fight to reform the church knew that his stand might cost him his life and that those who claimed to be on the side of Christ were in fact not on His side. In Luther's hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God we read, "For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal ... Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing ..."

Luther knew that he was in a battle. He knew the power of hate and lies. And Luther knew that he was not strong enough to confront that power by himself. But Luther by the power of God's Spirit was able to stand up to evil for the sake of the gospel. The churches of the Reformation exist today because faithful people recognized evil and confronted that evil with the Word of God, that "one little word" (as Luther put it) that can help us overcome

You don't hear this kind of talk in church these days. Both conservative and liberal congregations alike have toned down the spiritual warfare language. The therapeutic gospel is in vogue. All we need is a little positive thinking. All we need is a change in our lifestyle, a minor tweaking of the way we live and then everything will be fine.

But, that's not what this passage teaches. According to this passage, the followers of Christ are under attack. We need more than warm fuzzy thoughts to prepare for our day. We need to get dressed for battle! According to this passage every morning we need to put on the whole armor of God and pull out the sword of the Spirit because there are flaming arrows coming our way. We are in danger.

We live in a world where injustice and war and greed have become institutionalized. As one preacher put it, "God's grace has enemies. God's justice has a bounty on its head."

We really shouldn't be surprised about this.

Jesus told his disciples that they could expect opposition. His message would create division in families and in society.

They could expect to face persecution just as he was persecuted.

Those who follow Jesus will be going down a path that will inevitably lead to conflict with the powers that be. Indeed Jesus said on more than one occasion that disciples would have to take up a cross and follow him.

Jesus never promised us a rose garden. There will be conflict, and it will be more than just misunderstandings and disagreements.

It will take on cosmic dimensions.  
It will be a life and death spiritual struggle.

But, how do we prepare for conflict, especially when those who oppose us are often better armed and more powerful?

#### NOT OF THIS WORLD

We begin by remembering what Jesus said when he was on trial before Pilate. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. The kingdom of God is not like all the other kingdoms of this world. We do not seek to impose our will on others by force.

Rather the kingdom of God comes through the power of God's promises and the surety of God's will. Instead of playing by the rules of an often violent and evil world, we play by God's rules. We put our faith in the power of forgiveness and the strength of truth.

Remember that when Paul wrote this letter he was in prison and guarded by a Roman soldier. The soldier represented the world that was hostile to the gospel, the considerable might of the Roman Empire. You could have forgiven Paul if he had lost hope as he looked at that guard. It appeared that all hope was lost and that evil had the upper hand.

But, I think that as Paul looked at this powerful young soldier in full armor he reflected upon the true nature of power. Paul looked at that earthly armor and saw beyond it to a greater power, a spiritual armor that has the power to keep us strong in all circumstances.

Paul said in effect, "This power is great, but it is no match for the power and promises of God's word." And so he used the dress of this soldier as a way to emphasize the difference between the powers that be and the power of the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We can't be naive about the world. Evil is not a figment of our imagination. All we have to do is read the morning paper to be convinced of that.

But, how do we defend ourselves against evil is important. We cannot resist evil on its own terms. We cannot become a part of the downward spiral of violence that threatens the peace and well-being of our world.

Notice that though Paul mentions the common elements of armor: the belt, the breastplate, the shield, the helmet and the sword, Paul reinterprets that armor in a rather radical way.

The belt becomes the belt of truth, the breastplate becomes the breastplate of righteousness, the shield becomes the shield of faith, the helmet becomes the helmet of salvation and the sword becomes the sword of the Spirit.

Armor, a symbol of power and self-reliance has been transformed by Paul's illustration into a symbol of utter reliance upon God.

One of the things that we can do when attacked by evil is to paint a different vision of hope. This hope is not based upon superior firepower. It is a hope based upon God's Word. It is based upon truth and righteousness and those who have the courage to be peacemakers.

I watched a television show this past week about gang violence. A young teen-age girl had just gotten a new car for her birthday. She and a thirteen year old friend took a ride to the local store in their south central LA neighborhood. They were mistakenly identified by some gang members as the relatives of some rival gang members.

At a stoplight they opened fire on these young girls with automatic weapons. They didn't have a chance. And the mother of one girl upon hearing the gunfire ran to the scene and arrived just as the paramedics and police arrived.

It was a horrific, evil experience. None of the gang members ever apologized. The mother was treated callously by the authorities as well. How would she respond to such institutionalized evil? What could she do when she was surrounded by people who would just as soon kill you as look at you?

Incredibly this woman fought back by telling her story and using it as a way to promote peace instead of violence. The program pointed out that because of her efforts and the work of many others some progress has been made in reducing the gang violence in that area.

I think this is a good example of how the armor of God works. We confront evil and violence with the truth. By telling the painful truth of her story she was able to defend herself and her community.

## THE BELT OF TRUTH

Evil thrives on lies. Evil dies in the presence of the truth. And so the first item of "armor" that we need to put on in the morning is possibly the most important, the belt of truth.

In the Bible we sometimes read the rather quaint phrase "gird up your loins." Do you know what that means? In the ancient world everyone wore long, flowing robes. But, if a soldier was preparing for battle he would gather up the excess cloth and use his belt to hold it up. This way he wouldn't be tripped up or slowed down in the confusion of battle. Thus "gird up your loins" became a phrase that was often used to denote preparing for any momentous event.

Paul was saying that we prepare for the big tests in life by learning to tell the truth to ourselves and to others. Absolute honesty is the foundation for anyone who would be a disciple of Christ.

Most of the problems that have plagued our world are due to the fact that people have not told the truth. For example, the current financial crisis is due to the fact that people lied. They lied about the value of stocks. They lied about the value of homes. They lied about their ability to repay loans. And so a web of lies was created that eventually “brought down the house” ... so to speak.

Nothing can bring down a Christian faster than living a lie. We must learn to live the truth, and at the heart of the Christian faith is a very difficult truth. We are sinners. We fall short of our own standards, and we certainly fall short of God’s standards. We’re not the people we want to be or should be.

That’s why we begin every worship service with a confession of sin. We are putting on the belt of truth. We are preparing ourselves for spiritual battle by being honest to God and ourselves. This keeps us from being tripped up when the going gets rough.

My father used to jokingly say that if you always tell the truth then you won’t have to remember who you told what. He was right about that. Those old sayings about being caught in a web of deceit are very true.

And the lie is the greatest weapon that evil uses. So it stands to reason that we defend ourselves against the lie by telling the truth ... to ourselves and to others.

Telling the absolute truth is not an easy thing to do. There are those (like Pilate) who will sneer and ask, “What is truth?” I suppose Pilate did have a point. Sometimes the big lie does come disguised as a “truth.” Indeed, if you are a political leader like Pilate, I can understand how you might despair of ever knowing the truth.

But, the neat thing about the Christian faith is that it is self-correcting. We are suspicious not only of our enemies but also of ourselves! The doctrine of original sin teaches us that we are blind to the truth about our own sinfulness.

And so each day we look away from ourselves and look toward Jesus, the One that we call the way, the truth and the life. We put on the belt of truth by reflecting upon the Word made flesh, the very incarnation of God’s truth, Jesus. Jesus is the gold standard when it comes to truth. In the reflection of Jesus we see how we have failed and who we are called to be.

#### BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

And what is this truth that Jesus teaches us?

Jesus tells us that truth begins with love. Jesus said that we should love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

This is what it means to put on the breastplate of righteousness. We do what faith requires. In some small way we not only talk about our love for Jesus; we also show our love for Jesus through our actions.

It is not enough just to tell the truth. We must live the truth. We must (as the prophet put it) “do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” I’ve mentioned this many times before, but I think that it is a very important spiritual principle. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in dealing with parishioners who were having doubts about their faith used to say something like, “Act as if you have faith, do what faith requires and perhaps you will find that you do believe after all.”

In other words the problem with many of us who have doubts is that we are disobedient to the truth. We may know the truth. We may tell the truth to others. But, we do not live the truth. When you wake up every morning and put on the belt of truth also put on the breastplate of righteousness. Think of just one thing that you can do to live the truth. It doesn’t have to be a big thing. It just has to be some thing. In fact I am amazed at how some small act of love can, in the hands of God, become something great.

A few years ago a youth group in South Carolina decided that wanted to do something for the poor and hungry. So, on Super Bowl Sunday they decided to stand outside the sanctuary after the worship service with a big soup bowl and collect a dollar for world hunger. The idea caught on and now churches all over the country collect thousands of dollars and the word “Souper Bowl Sunday” has a totally different meaning.

One small act of righteous behavior is multiplied by a gracious God.

You don’t have to do everything. Just do something.

Each morning put on the breastplate of righteousness. Align your will with God’s will.

## SHOES OF PEACE

That leads us to footwear. Paul tells us to wear shoes that will take you on the path of peace. Gandhi once said, “Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and his teachings are non-violent except Christians.”

This is where God’s truth as revealed in Jesus gets really hard. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to those that persecute us, we may nod our heads in agreement. But, then we run into an actual enemy who wants to do us harm, and we are not so sure that we want to follow this crazy man named Jesus.

Jesus would not allow his disciples to take up the sword against those who persecuted him. Instead, he chose to take up a cross. And strangely enough it was the cross that finally defeated the evil one. Following Jesus requires great courage. It requires us to be devoted to peace in a world that is anxious to go to war.

People will not like this. But, this is the path that we have been called to walk.

PBS recently had a special about World War II. In particular they talked about the heroism of the medics who treated the wounded on the battlefield. Many of the medics were conscientious objectors who felt like it was wrong to take up arms against another human being. But, they had no qualms about giving their life in an attempt to save a fellow soldier.

These medics wore the shoes of peace on the battlefield. The red cross on their helmet made them a target, but they were willing to wear it with pride.

Jesus said “blessed are the peacemakers.” And it is clear that we are called to be peacemakers. Paul tells us that we need to be flexible about our wardrobe at this point. We need to wear whatever shoes will lead us to proclaim the gospel of peace.

All of us are God’s agents of reconciliation. All of us are called to be peacemakers.

The question is what shoes should we wear and what path should we take to proclaim that gospel of peace today?

We all have different opportunities to proclaim a gospel of peace, but I would suggest the perfect footwear for a peacemaker might very well be work boots with steel toes!

Ironically, walking in the path of peace often brings directly into the line of fire!

## THE SHIELD OF FAITH

And so it might be advisable to also equip ourselves with the shield of faith that will quench the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The Romans had shields that were quite large, and they used them very effectively in battle. The interlocking shields of the Roman army could provide a defense against arrows and stones from above when storming a fortified position, and they often proved to be an impenetrable barrier to the enemy when fighting on a level plain.

The shield itself was made of leather that was soaked in water before battle. In this way the flaming arrows would not do any harm to their joint defense. If we are going to have the

temerity to walk the path of peace and challenge the powers that be, we better have a shield of faith.

What is the shield of faith? It is a trust in the promises of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a belief that no matter how many flaming arrows comes our way we will not be moved by the enemy. The shield of God's promises will quench the arrows of doubt and despair.

As the confession puts it, "In life and in death we belong to God ..." As Luther put it in his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

### THE HELMET OF SALVATION

And the greatest promise of all, the crowning touch so to speak is the promise of salvation. Paul talks about putting on the helmet of salvation.

What is salvation? From what are we saved? We are saved from our sins. Salvation is summed up by the declaration of pardon, "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

More things are wrought by guilt than this world dreams of. It is guilt that keeps people from telling the truth. It is guilt that keeps people from doing justice. It is guilt that keeps people from making peace. It is guilt that keeps people from trusting the goodness of God.

Remember, you don't have to justify yourself. God in Christ has already done that. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Therefore, we are free to live a new way. We are new creations in Christ Jesus. Guilt no longer controls our life.

Luther said that when he felt tempted by Satan he would reply, "Remember Martin that you are baptized." By that he meant that in baptism his sins had been washed away. By the grace of God he was saved and nothing and no one could take that away.

Do not let guilt prevent you from being a soldier of the cross. Each and every morning put on the helmet of salvation. Remember the wonderful truth of salvation. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. You are a sinner saved by grace.

### THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Finally, Paul talks about the one offensive weapon in the whole armor of God, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Paul is talking about more than just reading the Bible. Paul is talking about doing theology. Paul is talking about applying the Bible to the modern world through the power of the Spirit.

In other words we are charged to look at life through the lens of Scripture as we are empowered by the Spirit. Christians have a unique way of looking at the world. We see the world through

the life of Jesus as He is revealed in Scripture, and we are empowered by the Spirit of Christ to bring that unique perspective into the world. So, each day it is necessary for the follower of Christ to study Scripture. But, it is not an academic study. Instead, we study the Word and ask ourselves, "So how should we live in light of this Word? How do we need to change?"

You know a sword cuts both ways. And the same is true of God's word.

We not only judge the world in which we live by God's Word and Spirit; we also are judged by the sword of God's Word and Spirit. Like a surgeon's scalpel the word of God cuts out of our lives those things that would harm us. Like an operation it may be painful, but in the long run it is good for us.

I hope you spend some time with this very rich passage. I think it is a great summary of the Christian faith. Like the Apostle's Creed or the Lord's Prayer, it gives us a neat way to remind ourselves of the basics and reflect upon what it really means to be a disciple of Christ.

In fact, I would challenge you this week to use this same passage for your devotions every day. Imagine yourself putting on the whole armor of God each morning. Maybe even write down some thoughts you have about the passage. How do these promises relate to the flaming arrows of despair that will be flying your way this week?

I think that you will not only feel protected but also empowered. My friends, be strong in the Lord. Put on God's armor and stand firm in the faith.

Amen.