



“Armored”

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Ephesians 6:10-20

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Today is the final Sunday in our series called “In Christ.” We have been journeying through the Letter to the Ephesians and discovering what it means for us as individuals and a community to be in Christ. Our series comes to a close today with what is possibly the most well-known passage from the Letter to the Ephesians: the armor of God. This passage is often read or studied in isolation, without much thought to how it fits into the larger narrative of Ephesians. This is the beauty and importance of reading and studying an entire letter or book of the Bible. In this final passage, we see many themes and elements running throughout the letter coming together; the culmination of what it means to be in Christ, both as individuals and as a community.

Utilizing the imagery of armor lends a serious tone to this passage. Our life in Christ is not just a simple, halfhearted thing. The author is likening our life in Christ to a battle that we need to suit up for. And the author is not just suggesting we put on the armor of God. The author commands that we put these things on. This informs us of the reality that we will face challenges and difficulties in life and we need to be prepared for them. How does the armor of God help us withstand the challenges and difficulties that come our way? How does being in Christ make a difference?

This passage of scripture is known as a *peroratio*, which is the final part of a speech. This served two purposes in classical Greek rhetoric: it reminded the audience of the main points of the speech (a recapitulation) and also to influence their emotions. This rhetorical device was commonly used by Roman orators. This was the type of passionate appeal that generals and military leaders would make before a battle and there are many examples of that in antiquity. We see the author of the Letter to the Ephesians utilizing both purposes here. As we will see throughout this sermon, the author does refer back to previous themes in this letter. We certainly see an emotional appeal here, too, not only in the description and importance of the armor, but in the closing words when the author refers to himself as an ambassador in chains and asks the Ephesians to pray for him.

So why the imagery of armor and battle? It seems like a rapid departure from the rest of the letter, at least in my estimation. Let’s explore. Verse 10 reads “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” Finally. Finally! We are finally through with the therefore and the author is finally driving their points home! “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” Does that sound familiar? Does it sound anything like Ephesians 3:14-21, which Rev. Call preached on a couple of weeks ago? “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit...Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” The author is reminding them that their strength comes from the Lord. God’s power is stronger than ours. God’s power is superior to all other powers.

“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but... against spiritual forces of evil.” Here we are being commanded to put on the whole armor of God, and why? To stand against the tricks and deceptions of the devil and against spiritual forces of evil. It seems we run the risk of either giving the devil too much credit or not enough credit for the bad things that happen in life, but whatever your understanding of the devil is, experience will tell us that evil is active and present in this world. It is clear that evil is an active player on the world’s stage. Let’s root this in some historical context. Many ancient people believed that the air was filled with evil spirits bent on harming humanity. With this in mind, it is no wonder that the author of the letter to the Ephesians would liken life to a battle! The whole universe was a battleground. Not to mention the fact that there are several accounts in the gospels of Jesus casting out demons and evil spirits. We might be less acutely aware of or less likely to consider these things a threat these days, but the truth of the matter is that evil (and even spiritual warfare) exist, and we need to be equipped to defend ourselves.

So what do we do? We “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.” (6:13) Take up the whole armor of God. Not just part of it, but the whole armor, which we will get into in just a moment here. Armor is intended to protect vulnerable areas of the

body and if anything is missing, the person wearing it becomes more vulnerable to damage when under attack. We need all the components of the armor of God in order to withstand the challenges and difficulties we encounter. As for “that evil day,” it could refer to multiple things. It could be the span of time before the end and Christ returns, it could be particular instances of temptations and trials, and it could simply refer to every day life in the present age. We put on the full armor of God to withstand whatever comes our way. “And having done everything, to stand firm” suggests that we have agency in this. While putting on the armor of God is written in command form, we actually have to put in the work and tend to the armor. We do all that is in our power to align ourselves with God and to suit up and then we stand in God’s power and strength.

In this (the 11:00am) worship service, our closing hymn is called “Soldiers of Christ, Arise.” I typically do not gravitate towards songs with militaristic imagery, nor do I typically view Christians in that way. More often I will think of the body of Christ as a family, a community. I would sooner think of our lives as Christians in agricultural, natural imagery. The way we view and define ourselves and others as Christians impacts the way we go about mission and living out our gospel call. And yet I could not pass this hymn up. There is no denying that our passage for today evokes and conveys the imagery of battle, warfare, and most obviously, a suit of armor. While we have clarified that the Apostle Paul is most likely not the author of the Letter to the Ephesians, there is no denying the fact that Paul himself did spend time in prison. In verse 20 the author identifies themselves as “an ambassador in chains.” It puts a new perspective on it to realize that whoever wrote this, or whoever wrote it on behalf of Paul, very likely wrote this with a clear sense and presence of Roman soldiers. The original audience most likely envisioned a Roman soldier when they heard this. The armor that the Roman soldiers wore was very specific, just as soldiers do to this day. The armor was designed specifically to protect them when under attack. And in seeing the armor of the Roman soldier, a parallel could be made to the Christian life. In Christ we have the armor of God available to us. The armor we wear as Christians is not visible, but is the strongest armor we could ever ask for.

So let’s turn now and take a look at each component of the armor of God. The author conveys all of the armor in the form of a command: we are being commanded to put all of these things on, indicating their importance to those of us in Christ. First, the belt of truth. When we envision a belt in modern times, I imagine most of us think of something relatively thin that holds our pants up or maybe accents a dress. However, that is not accurate to what a Roman soldier’s belt was. In fact, the original Greek makes no mention of a belt at all! Rather, it reads “gird your loins.” A girdle is probably more accurate than a belt. Girdle of truth does not have quite the same ring to it, but it gives us a better sense. A girdle wraps more tightly and higher around your core. This granted soldiers strength, support, and stability as they battled. God’s truth gives us the support and strength we need. We stand firm in the truth of who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. God’s truth gives us a secure place to stand and to navigate life.

Next up is the breastplate of righteousness. A breastplate protects two of the most vital organs, our heart and lungs. Righteousness speaks to the way we live our lives. Righteousness is the doing or being what is just and right. It is living in right relationship with God and living in alignment with God’s will for us. Righteousness is not only something God requires of us, but is something God gives to us through faith. There is a reason the belt of truth goes on before the breastplate of righteousness- you need to know God’s truth before you can live in it! Just as what a breastplate would have done for a Roman soldier’s physical heart, the breastplate of righteousness protects our spiritual heart. The devil likes to attack our hearts, but living a righteous life, following after God gives us perspective and protection against attacks.

Next we have the shoes for the proclamation of the gospel of peace. I love how the NRSV translation we read says “whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” When we are leaving to go somewhere, we are not fully ready until we have our shoes on. Having shoes on indicates readiness. As Christians we must be ready to share the gospel of peace. Here we harken back to Ephesians 2:14 & 17 where the author declares that Jesus is our peace and has proclaimed peace to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Peace comes with unity in the body of Christ and because of what Christ has done on our behalf, we are empowered and compelled to share that message of peace.

Now that we have all of these things, we take up the shield of faith. This particular Roman shield was about 2 ½ by 4 feet, made of wood, and then covered in leather. The shields were often soaked in water to provide protection from flaming arrows, a literal form of attack in antiquity. However, the author of the letter describes the shield as protecting us from the flaming arrows of the evil one. Our faith in God helps us contend with the arrows of temptation. Faith demonstrates our complete trust in Jesus and God’s power. Through faith in God we can resist temptation as it comes our way.

Next is the helmet of salvation. A helmet protects another vital part of the body, the head. A Roman soldier's helmet was made of iron and covered with bronze. It had a flared neck guard and hinged cheek guards. This helmet provided comprehensive coverage and protection against the broadsword, a three to four foot long sword. We believe that salvation is not only past event, but something we look forward to in eternity, as well as live into now. The helmet of salvation is a reminder that our past sins are forgiven and that forgiveness is available to us now and in the future. We are surrounded and covered by God's grace. This reminds us of our divine inheritance spoken about in Ephesians 1: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us...In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory." The helmet of salvation reminds us who we are in Christ and what God has promised us. This gives us security and a firm place to stand.

Finally, we come to the sword of the Spirit. This is the first piece in the armor of God that is actually a weapon that we wield. The sword that the author mentions is a short sword used for close combat. This sword is the word of God. As Christians, we need to know the word of God. We need to read and reflect upon scripture and then apply it to our lives, allowing the word of God to transform us. Hebrews 4:12 describes the word of God as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The word of God is perpetually sharp, bearing life and power in the life of Christians. We learn to conquer the enemy as we understand scripture and know God's truth.

We come to the final and most important weapon in our arsenal: prayer. We can think of prayer as the component that activates the armor of God. The armor of God is relatively useless without prayer. Why is prayer so important? Prayer is nothing less than communication with the God whose power and might is above all earthly and spiritual powers. It is a direct line of communication to God. Prayer is the space in which we not only pour out our hearts before God, but receive our directives. Prayer connects us with the God who loves us and saves us. As we spend time in prayer we discern God's will, receive God's peace, and deepen our relationship with God.

The author of Ephesians says this about prayer: "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. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak." (6:18-20) We learn a few things about prayer here. First, there is a sense of constancy. We not only pray to God when the going gets tough, but in our daily living. We make prayer a daily habit. By connecting with God in prayer each day, we find that we receive the strength and grace needed to make it through each day, good days and bad days. Prayer is like a tether that keeps us connected to God. The more time that we spend with God, the closer we get to God, and the shorter the tether is. If we are already in the habit of daily prayer and connecting with God, we are more apt to feel secure and grounded in God when hard times hit or temptation comes because we have placed less distance between us and God.

Second, our prayers should have a certain intensity, or persistence, to them. We come before God with the confidence as children of God, with the confidence that we have been invited in and God wants to hear our prayers. We offer our prayers in the boldness that God hears and listens to our prayers. We believe and affirm that God is capable of answering those prayers. We are persistent in bringing our prayers and petitions before God, not only for ourselves, but for others. Which brings us to the final point about prayer: we pray for others. We see the author here asking for the Ephesians to pray for him, that he would have boldness as he proclaims the mystery of the gospel (we first see that mystery in Eph 1 and then again in Eph 3, which is that salvation is open to all people, both Jews and Gentiles- see, he's recapitulating!). There is nothing wrong with praying for things about yourself. But take stock of your prayers: how much are you praying for others compared to yourself? Praying for others helps us to take the focus off of ourselves. It builds empathy and compassion for what others are experiencing. When you are going through a challenging time, it makes all the difference to know that others are praying for you.

So here we are, here we stand, suited up in the armor of God. While you cannot visibly see it, you know it makes all the difference for us as we live in Christ. It provides protection against spiritual attacks, it guards our hearts and minds, it equips us to share the gospel of peace, and it centers us in Christ. For the past five weeks we have been learning and exploring what it means to be in Christ, to have Christ as the center. Keeping Jesus as the center of our lives is of the utmost importance for us. With Christ at the center we have an identity that is secure and the promise of grace and salvation. We have peace that surpasses all understanding and pervades our life in every season and circumstance.

We are rooted and grounded in love. We are chosen as God's divine instrument to make the gospel known to all the world. We are called and equipped for the task at hand. And with Christ at the center, we have strength and an unshakeable foundation, a solid place to stand. Christ means everything. In Christ we have everything we could ever imagine and more. Thanks be to God that we are in Christ and Christ is at the center of it all. Amen.