

“Kitted Out”

Eph. 6:10-17

6/21/20

When I was a kid going to Sunday School, some Bible stories and concepts resonated better with me than others. I remember hearing an awful lot about kindness, and sharing, and obedience, and love. I knew those things were important, but I related better to the stories that demonstrated courage and perseverance and strong character. Give me a giant and a kid with a sling, or one young man versus a whole den full of lions! This morning’s final message from Ephesians is about one of those passages. It talks about the Christian life as a battle between good and evil! I liked it then, and I still do today! Listen and see what I mean!

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore 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. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the

flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph. 6:10-17)

Paul envisions the Christian life as a battle. Keep in mind that he is writing this letter while chained to a Roman soldier as he awaits trial. He is being persecuted for his faith, as many Christians were at that time. For Paul, this image of the Christian life as a battle with life and death consequences was very real! He begins by saying that this battle isn't just against the Roman oppressors. No! There are spiritual forces of evil behind those physical forces. The belief in the existence and actions of evil forces and spirits was widespread in Paul's day, and he accepted them as real, as did Jesus! And, he believed that the devil was directing these forces, seeking to destroy and corrupt God's good work.

Christians today are divided over how to understand these things, with many Christians in more secular societies like ours labeling these views as allegorical or mythical, while many Christians in the developing world believe that they are literally true. I don't want to get hung up here. All of us believe that there are forces of evil operating in the world- forces of racism, sexism, exploitation, ignorance, and corporate greed, for example. These forces seem to have a life of their own in spite of our best efforts to eradicate them. Paul says we need to acknowledge these powerful forces and be prepared for their attacks.

On Dec. 8, 2004, a single question from a young soldier touched off a national firestorm. Following the invasion of Iraq, U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld went to encourage the troops at an Army camp in Kuwait. During a news conference, Army Specialist Thomas Wilson asked Rumsfeld, “Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to armor-up our vehicles?” Wilson and other American soldiers felt vulnerable, as they were being sent into lethally dangerous situations without adequate protection, and he rightly complained. This caused a great public outcry that resulted in improved equipment for our men and women in Iraq!

Armor of one kind or another has been an important part of warfare from ancient times. Here in Ephesians, Paul describes the armor typically used by a Roman soldier, and assures us that we have all the armor we need as we battle evil forces. And, he instructs us to make use of it all!

¹³Therefore 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. (Eph. 6:13) The “evil day” he is referring to probably means a time of testing or temptation.

Let’s look at the specific kinds of spiritual armor that God provides for us. *¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.* (Eph. 6:14) The belt was worn to

hike up the robe that a soldier wore, so that he was able to move freely. Swords and daggers could also hang from it. Paul says that truth is our spiritual belt. It is one of the cardinal virtues. When Christians are attacked for the positions we take in society, we should never be vulnerable to attack regarding our honesty. We are to be known for our courageous and caring truthfulness. Without truth, it's very difficult for others to trust what we are saying.

Next comes the "breastplate of righteousness." In Roman armor, the breastplate protected the heart and lungs, crucially important organs. But what does "righteousness" mean? Here, it doesn't refer to our status before God- being made right with God through the work of Jesus Christ. Rather, here it is a broad term referring to our character and integrity. It's about how we live! Again, those who oppose us should not be able to call any part of our character into question, because that would also call our message into question. The breastplate of righteousness.

Let's move on. ¹⁵*As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.* (Eph. 6:15) In order to "stand fast," a soldier needed good footwear, usually rugged sandals in those days. Here, the sandals are related to proclaiming the gospel of peace. Now that's a bit of a paradox, isn't it? A soldier, kitted out for battle, proclaiming peace! I think it's a recognition that God's ultimate intention for

our world is peace- peace between nations, between communities, between tribes, between races, between family members. That's what God wants for his creation! But the forces of evil want to sow divisions between us, so we are at war with those forces. We bring the gospel of peace.

Next, 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.* (Eph. 6:16) Flaming arrows were a real physical and psychological threat in ancient times. Multi-layered leather shields were soaked in water before a battle in order to quench those fiery arrows, and they did so effectively. But it took great courage not to run away when those flaming missiles began to rain down! Here, Paul likens that protective shield to our faith. We trust that God has our back when we are doing his work in the world, be that in our families, communities, or nation. As Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there." The shield of faith.

Just two more pieces of armor. ¹⁷*Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* (Eph. 6:17)

The helmet, of course, is vitally important, protecting the head from injury. Here, the helmet represents salvation. Sometimes evil works its way into our hearts, causing us to question whether we are really recipients of God's

grace. Perhaps we worry that we're not good enough, obsessing over a particular moral failure.

When Dr. Donn Moomaw was pastor of Bel Air Presbyterian Church near Los Angeles, Ronald and Nancy Reagan began attending services there. He and his wife became close to the Reagans and they remained so during Reagan's time as governor of California and later as president. When Reagan was shot in an assassination attempt in 1981, Moomaw immediately flew to Washington. He accompanied Nancy Reagan to the hospital. He found that Reagan was doing remarkably well after such a close call. And Reagan seemed open to talk about his faith.

Moomaw asked him, "Are you ready to meet God?" Reagan replied that he had a lot more he wanted to accomplish first! Moomaw persisted. "No, I mean, if the bullet had taken you, would you have been OK with God?" Reagan thought a while and said, "Yes." "How do you know?" pushed Moomaw. He looked Moomaw in the eye and said, "I know I'd be OK with God because I have a Savior."

That sums it up about as well as you can! Our salvation is dependent not on our goodness, but on what God has done for us. We have a Savior, and we can remain confident in that during dark nights of the soul. The helmet of salvation.

Finally, Paul says to take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. When we're attacked by doubts or fears, the Word of the God is a wonderful defense! It's what Jesus used in Mark 4 when he was attacked and tempted by the devil in the wilderness! I encourage you to read and even memorize meaningful parts of Scripture, because they are so effective to calm, strengthen, and encourage us during difficult times.

And we're in difficult times right now, aren't we? The ongoing work to keep the Coronavirus at bay, even though we're tired of the restrictions. And the new energy in the fight against racism at every level of society and in every institution. It is a fight that will not only benefit people of color, but it will benefit white folks, too, since harboring prejudice against any of God's people is a stain on our hearts, and keeps us from being like our Lord, who holds no such bigotry against any of the creatures he has made. All of us have a stake in rooting out racism. So, these are battles worth fighting. Just be sure to put on your armor so you can face every foe with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the power of the Spirit of God!