

Dressed for Battle: Putting on the Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-17

Introduction

I have asked the speakers who are scheduled to speak during our summer series to preach from a favorite passage of scripture; from a text with which God has uniquely encouraged them in the construction of their lives for the glory of God. I did not have a lot of time to think about which text I might choose and it was actually very difficult to narrow it down to one.

I Peter 2:9 was used significantly in my early years as a sort of life verse which reminded me that I had been chosen to be a part of God's holy nation – a royal priest to declare the praises of Him who called me out of darkness into His marvelous light.

I thought of Psalm 23, which is a wonderful passage, glorifying the worth of our Shepherd and the work of our Shepherd, who tirelessly provides for His sheep as a faithful keeper of His flock. It was this passage, in fact, that taught me, in my earlier ministry, the value of reading commentaries – the wisdom of others who expanded the context and culture of scripture.

I thought of Ezra 7, which I often now write below my signature when asked to sign a book. Verse 10 delivers a wonderful challenge, if not a timeless job description of a New Testament pastor/teacher. We are told that in the great revival in Jerusalem, the leader, Ezra,

. . . set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach [it] . . .

There are so many great texts. In fact, all scripture is profitable, right? It is all,

. . . inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the [believer] may be . . . equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

This is yet another great text for the summer series.

I was determined to find a text somewhere besides the book of Job!

Today, I want to launch this series on the construction of a believer's life by taking you to a text in which the apostle Paul challenges the believers in the city of Ephesus. He challenges them to so construct their lives and prepare their hearts that their lives would stand the tests of time, temptation, and trouble.

Turn to the book of Ephesians and look at Ephesians 6:11-13.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

In other words, build your house with a hurricane in mind; build your life with trials and tests and

temptations in mind. Clothe yourself in the armor of a warrior which has been designed by God for spiritual battle.

Get ready for life!

I read some time ago, about the expedition of John Franklin. In 1845, Franklin left England to discover a Northwest passageway – a seaway for ships through the Canadian Arctic region that connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He took with him on this expedition, 138 specially chosen men from the Royal Navy.

No one knew what lay ahead – these men did not even seem to be aware of the severe weather conditions they would encounter in and around the North Pole. None the less, they sailed off in two state-of-the-art ships. Each ship was equipped with an auxiliary steam engine and a huge storeroom that could hold a twelve day supply of coal, should steam power ever be needed during the voyage.

The men were confident in their quest as the ships sailed off amidst imperial pomp and glory – but they were unprepared. They had not planned thoroughly enough for what lay ahead in the ice-filled waters off northern Alaska. In fact, the only clothing they took were their uniforms and thin overcoats provided by Her Majesty's Navy.

Two months after their departure, a British whaler made contact with the two ships off the coast of Canada. He was the last European to see them alive. Search parties would spend twelve years retracing the path of the Franklin expedition. Eventually, some of the puzzle was pieced together.

The expedition had evidently been stalled by icy water. Eskimos reported seeing men pushing a wooden boat across the ice. The members of the search party saw a haunting sight at Simpson Straight – three wooden masts of one of the ships protruding up through the ice. Amid all the findings, the most devastating of all was the discovery that neither ship had stocked their coal supply. In fact, they had both turned that huge storeroom into a lounge filled with a 1,200-volume library, an organ, and even cupboard space for elegant place settings of china and silver for all the officers. One historian said that the Franklin expedition was prepared for weather conditions inside the Royal Navy officer's club, not the Arctic Ocean. One search party found 30 frozen bodies in a tent near the waters edge. The officers were dressed in their overcoats with their silk scarves still in place.ⁱ

These men were confident; their hopes were high, but they were not prepared for the challenges of that expedition.

Jesus Christ said, "The world will hate you, because it hated Me." (John 15:18)

Are you prepared for that?

Jesus also warned His disciples,

They will make you outcasts . . . an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. (John 16:2)

Are you ready for that?

Jesus said, "I came not to grant peace on earth but division; members in your family will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother." (Luke 12:51-53)

Are you ready for that?

"Persecution will arise because of the presence of the word," Jesus also explained. (Matthew 13:21)

Our Lord, throughout His life, was mocked by the religious leaders. The chief priests mocked Him. Herod mocked Him. Eventually, the soldiers mocked Him.

The early church was ridiculed at Pentecost and the city mocked the apostles by saying, "These men are drunk." (Acts 2:13)

Hebrews 11 records that many believers endured cruel mocking.

Are you ready for that?

Believers will be persecuted for the cross of Christ. (Galatians 6:12)

The godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer tribulation. (II Timothy 3:12)

Paul wrote in I Corinthians 4:11-13,

. . . [we] are roughly treated . . . we are reviled . . . we are persecuted . . . we are slandered . . . we [are considered] as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

Are you ready for this kind of treatment and reputation?

Get Ready for Life – By Putting on the Armor of God

The apostle Paul assumes that you and I are not ready – at least not until we have mentally put on six pieces of armor designed by God to help us stand the tests of life.

1. The first piece of armor mentioned is the belt of truth.

Paul writes in Ephesians 6:14a,
... *gird your loins with truth* . . .

This was a long leather undershirt that hung to the thighs. It was critical in that everything connected to this apron-like shirt – the sword hung from it, the breastplate attached to it. Everything was in some way connected to the truth; in some way dependant upon the under-girding of the truth!

Apart from inspired truth; revealed truth; infallible truth from God, we do not have the ability to construct life capable of withstanding anything, much less believing anything. We are certainly not ready to take on the world system which is an enemy of the absolute truth of God.

2. The second piece of armor is the breastplate of righteousness.

Paul goes on in Ephesians 6:14b to tell us to,
... *put on the breastplate of righteousness,*

For most soldiers, this would be strips of leather layered one on top of another, forming a covering over the heart. If they were wealthy enough, they would have a custom designed, perfectly molded plate of metal.

Since we are the sons and daughters of the Emperor Himself, we have the promise of perfectly fitting armor – uniquely designed for our heart; our makeup; our design and skill.

This is the covering of Christ’s righteousness; this is the character of Christ which protects our hearts; this is the offering of Christ on our behalf that continually cleanses and protects our hearts. This is the righteousness of Christ which ultimately covers and protects our hearts from any fatal wound.

3. The third piece of armor is shoes.

Paul goes on to say, in Ephesians 6:15, that we need a good pair of shoes. He writes,

... *having shod your feet with the preparation [“etoimasia,” readiness or, in this context, firmness] of the gospel of peace;*

Most people overlook that shoes are part of the armor. They are necessary for at least two things.

- First, shoes are necessary for balance; for providing solid footing.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers,

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also

you received, in which also you stand, (I Corinthians 15:1)

The gospel is like a pair of good shoes that gives balance as we stand on the truth.

- Secondly, shoes are necessary for progress.

The Romans had embedded in their leather soles, little pieces of metal. These were first century cleats. The wearer could charge a hill or keep their footing on uneven terrain; they could advance forward against enemy attack during hand to hand combat.

By the way, the soldier did not need cleats if he was retreating. If he was running away from his enemy, he might want speed, but he did not necessarily need traction.

This is like a football player on the gridiron – cleats help him move the ball downfield against opposing forces.

If you have ever been to a football game – and I have been to a few – perhaps you have noticed the way people dress up to cheer on their team. I have seen fans wearing football helmets; wearing a jersey they paid 150 bucks for; paint their faces. However, no matter how passionate they are for their team, I have never seen a fan wearing cleats – not once!

Cleats are not needed in the stands or on the sidelines. Only the players on the field wear them – that is where the action is; that is where the contest is being waged.

Paul is assuming we are going to get into the game. For the believer in the thick of it, the gospel is what to advance against opposing forces.

4. The fourth piece of armor is the shield of faith.

Paul next draws our attention to one of the most fascinating pieces of armor the Romans used in battle. In Ephesians 6:16, Paul refers to the shield of faith.

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one.

This explicitly states that Satan is an aggressor. He fires flaming missiles, which could be translated, “flaming arrows” or “fiery darts”.

Paul, in this verse, is referring to a common practice during his day. When an army came against a city in ancient days, they would tip their arrows in pitch, light them, and then shoot them over the city walls. As soon as these arrows hit the rooftops of

buildings, the pitch would splatter and small fires would be started.

The same would also be done against an advancing army – arrows dipped in pitch and lighted would be fired so that the clothing of the soldiers would catch on fire and panic would erupt in the ranks. The soldiers' shields were covered with leather that had been soaked with water before battle in order to extinguish the fires caused by the pitch.

Paul is saying, "Have your shield ready! You never know when fire is going to break out all around you."

A few years ago, I was on the phone with a pastor friend. Charlie was supposed to have called me the day before, but did not, so I called him. We talked a while and I said, "Now about those plans we were discussing, are they going to work for you?"

I will never forget him saying, "Well, I can't seem to find my calendar . . . things are a bit turned upside down right now. You see, my nine year old son was hit by a car yesterday and killed. Could I just call you back in a few days?"

I remember being so convicted because the night before I had been down at the drugstore. Our youngest daughter had been running a high fever through the night. Marsha had her in the bathtub sponging her with cold water. It was midnight and I was getting some medicine. There I was at that drug store complaining to God, "Lord, life is just great . . . why can't this kind of thing happen after breakfast on my day off. Can't You time these trials a little more conveniently?"

I realized, while on the phone with this pastor, that at the same time I was in that drugstore complaining, he and his wife were hanging on to their shields for dear life.

Now, it is important to know the kind of shield this was. There were two kinds of shields in the Roman army.

One shield was a small, round shield worn on the arm of a soldier in hand-to-hand combat.

There was another kind of shield – a "thureos" – that was four feet tall and two feet wide. It was nicknamed "the wall". This is the shield Paul is referring to in this verse.

- Among other things, the soldier would often plant this shield in the ground and hide behind it as the enemy fired.

In the same way, in the believer's life, there are times when all we can do is plant the shield of faith and wait it out. All the while, we are trusting with

faith in God's person and provision and providence and protection. As David wrote,

But You, O Lord, are a shield about me . . . (Psalm 3:3)

- This shield not only protected the soldier, but united the soldiers – literally unified the army.

The Roman army had a novel development regarding this shield and often was victorious because of it. The edges of these shields were beveled and notched so that they could be locked into place with the shields on both sides. As a result, they could actually have a row of men that made up a wall of metal, advancing against an army.

What a picture this is of a unified church – a body of believers advancing into hostile territory. It is no wonder that the powers of darkness hate, more than almost anything, a unified church.

Is it any surprise then, that the most dangerous times for any church are times of disunity and dissension? Is it any wonder that when conflict occurs among believers, the devil is more than happy to supply ammunition to both sides? He loves it.

There is little doubt that the worst enemy of the church is frequently the church. The thing that often keeps the church from moving forward is the church. The thing that keeps the church from winning the world is that the world has won the church.

Similarly, the thing that often discourages younger believers from growing in Christ is other believers who refuse to grow up.

What kind of impact could we have when, with unified hearts toward advancing the glory of God and the gospel of Christ, we are found with shields locked together?

This is like the church in Jerusalem, known for, . . . ***with one mind . . . [exhibiting] gladness and sincerity of heart (Acts 2:46)***

- This shield not only protected the soldier and united the army, but it reflected the sun.

This "thureos" was made, basically, out of a large plank of wood, overlaid with strips of leather. However, in the center of the shield, the soldiers would attach a round piece of brass. Before going into battle, they would polish that piece of brass until it shone with the brilliance of a mirror. As the Roman army walked into battle, they would literally reflect the light of the sun into the eyes of their enemies and, in doing so, distract them.

The implication is obvious, is it not? With our faith in Christ, we reflect the light of God's Son, who is the light of the world, into the world around us – even, as it were, into the eyes of our great enemy.

The devil hates the person and glory of Christ, our great Light. He hates the reflection of Christ's gospel – the radiant light of the gospel has the power to dispel the darkness.

So,

Let your light shine before men . . . that they may . . . [ultimately] glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

5. The fifth piece of armor is the helmet of salvation.

Ephesians 6:17a tells us,

And take the helmet of salvation . . .

Now, this does not refer to being saved. Paul is not saying that after we put on the shoes and the belt or apron of truth and the breastplate, now get saved.

This cannot be what Paul is talking about. We would not have this armor, if we were not saved. In fact, we would not even be in the army as a soldier of Christ, if we were not saved.

A soldier's helmet protected his head – his mind; his thoughts. Salvation is the truth that we believe by faith.

The greatest, most severe battles leveled against the believer are battles that take place in the mind.

Paul is saying to guard our minds with the truth of God; specifically as it relates to salvation.

Salvation has three tenses:

- Past salvation – this is justification by faith alone – the moment when we were born again by the Spirit of God.
- Present salvation – this is sanctification – the ongoing work of Christ which conforms us to His image.
- Future salvation – when we will be delivered forever into the fellowship of heaven and our Lord.

Past salvation is the moment when we were delivered from the penalty of sin.

Present salvation is the daily battle over the power of sin.

Future salvation is the deliverance from the presence of sin.

We need to get ready to fight regarding our salvation. The enemy will:

- bring doubts about our past salvation;
- accuse regarding our failure in our sanctification;
- distract our vision regarding our coming glorification.

So we need to put on the thoughts that protect regarding all that God:

- *has* done for us;
- *is* doing in us;
- *has* prepared for us.

6. The final piece of armor is the sword of the Spirit.

Paul writes in Ephesians 6:17b,

. . . take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

This is the principle point of contact with the enemy.

The sword is not our cleverness, our skill, our methods, our winsomeness – it is the word of God.

Now, the Roman sword was two feet long and sharpened on both sides. The writer of Hebrews refers to this when he says that,

. . . the word of God is . . . sharper than any two-edged sword . . . (Hebrews 4:12)

When Jesus Christ went into the wilderness to be tempted, He did not bind the devil. Three times He was tempted and all three times the first words out of His mouth were,

. . . "It is written . . ." (Matthew 4)

Three different times, Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. He encountered the enemy and used the living powerful sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Conclusion

Let me draw two inferences from this paragraph, as we attempt to construct a life capable of withstanding the high winds of the storms of life.

1. First, God has not given the Christian final victory over sin, but the potential for repeated victory over sin.

Do not be caught off guard, especially those who are young in the faith. Do not expect one victory to signal the end of temptation. The battle is daily.

Every day we will face tests of integrity; honesty; purity; perspective; trust. Our greatest battle over temptation will be our next one.

We have the God-granted potential for victory over one battle at a time. And He expects us to dress out for war.

This is the reason that when we were saved, we were not handed a robe and crown, but were handed a sword and a shield.

Are you ready for this kind of life? I fear that many Christians are dressed in silk scarves and thin wool coats – heading into the fiercest blizzards of spiritual battle.

If you are not alert already, let me add a second thought.

2. Secondly, the battle in the believer's life does not diminish with commitment to Christ, but becomes more dangerous and difficult.

The believer who will say, "Lord I want to place my life under construction – consider my life a building site for Your Spirit to demolish, reconstruct,

rebuild, change, and repair," has done nothing less than challenge the enemies of Christ. All that opposes heaven will now oppose them.

The Christian who dares to say, "I want to construct a life that glorifies God!" has just moved up to the front lines where he can see the enemy dipping his arrows in pitch and then aiming them directly at him.

If this is your heart – get ready. And by the way, Paul, the veteran soldier, is cheering you on.

Listen to his pep talk, in Ephesians 6:10 and 13, as you dress out,

. . . be strong in the Lord [not in yourself, but in the Lord] and in the strength of His might.

. . . take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able [I love that – you will be able] to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Go for it! But get ready – be prepared for the fight of your life.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 7/1/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works, pp. 155-156.