

STRONG IN THE LORD

Ephesians 6:10-20

September 16, 2018

To be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, we have to put on the whole armor of God. Now, strength and power are necessary because we are in a battle for our own souls, and for the souls of others.

Some may think that life for ancient people was more terrifying than for us today. Demons, devils, and evil spirits haunted every corner of the ancient world. The whole universe was a battleground. But ask my son Joel about terror. When he was nine the twin towers were struck down by an enemy attacking our own soil. And in school he learned about the ominous power of the split atom. On television he was confronted with raging masses in the streets of Irag, and he knew that what is happening in the Israeli/Arab world may determine whether the button (or buttons) are pushed, and the shades drawn on civilization. It was no wonder that when the evening TV news glaringly reminded us of the dark abyss on the edge of which we are perilously balanced, he asked me to stay with him as he went to bed. In the dark of the night before sleep came, we talked of the future, of war, of death, and of hope, and of God, and of heaven, too. Paul's words about wrestling "*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places*" do not strike Joel's ears with strangeness. Nor mine. At least by hint, Joel realizes what most of us have discovered, that Paul was writing of forces which invade the world, our inner- and interpersonal worlds, to make us sin, even to destroy us. So our call, yours and mine, is to be strong in the Lord. To be so requires putting on the whole armor of God.

In the first half of Ephesians Paul prayed that his readers would come to know the power of God which was demonstrated and is operative in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That power had been demonstrated, too, in the readers' conversion to Christ. Each person's conversion is a resurrection from the

deadness of sin to life in Christ and deliverance from the prevailing forces of sin. Now, in this last chapter, Paul reminds his readers that in all their future they will have to rely on the same resurrection power. We may be tempted to think that our enemies are human and then to seek to fight with worldly weapons. But our real enemies are the spiritual forces that stand behind all institutions and seek to control the lives of persons and nations.

So against these enemies, Paul describes the full armor of God in detail:

The Belt of Truth

A girdle was a belt. Its most immediate and practical use for a soldier was to gird (hold tight) his tunic so he might be free in his movement. It also provided a place to hang his sword. The imagery here is that truth holds together all virtues and makes them available and effectual.

The Breastplate of Righteousness

Paul talks about the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness in the same breath and the same verse. If he is following Isaiah 59:17, as he seems to be, the warrior “puts on righteousness as a breastplate,” yet Paul gives it a more specific meaning. As the purpose of a breastplate is to guard the most vital parts of the body, so the Christian protects himself and herself by righteousness. When persons are clothed with righteousness, they are impregnable. In what sense?

Passions are redeemed and redirected. Do not forget that righteousness, as Paul sees it, is first of all a gift. God, through the cross, imputes righteousness; that is, He looks at us as though we were without sin. The imputed righteousness of God is appropriated by our faithful and obedient response to Him. Thus we are regenerated—made over, into new creations by Christ dwelling within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our passions, then, are redirected. The drives and instincts of our lives move under the sway and of the indwelling of Christ.

So also, [#2] when Christians are clothed in righteousness, they are impregnable because *death loses its sting*. The most devastating aspect of death is our fear of it, especially our fear of what lies beyond death in the mysterious abyss of eternity. When we accept the grace of God, extravagantly given us in the cross of Jesus Christ, death is defeated. We know that He who gave himself in Christ holds our future, and beyond death we have nothing to fear. Clothed in righteousness, we are impregnable, yes?

Sandals of the Gospel of Peace

The military boots were one of the most important parts of the Roman soldier's equipment. They were designed for long marches over every kind of rough terrain. It has been said that the attention given to soldiers' boots was the secret of the Roman Conquest. So Paul uses this image in v. 15: "*having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace.*"

Even though we may not grasp the precise meaning of this metaphor, two possibilities can add to our strength in the Lord.

In the Gospel the believer is prepared for all difficulties. The Gospel gives us the stability of sure footing. We can march over the rough terrain of life, over the mountain passes of excruciating pain, through deserts of fear and terror, without falling out.

We have to be ready to carry the Gospel any-and everywhere. The prophetic message of Isaiah 52:7 must have been in Paul's mind. "*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'*" Missionary spirit, evangelical zeal, preparedness and readiness to carry the Gospel everywhere—that is at least one meaning of wearing the sandals of the Gospel.

Some of the keenest observers of the current scene are intimating that the times are coming when what is happening now in Latin America and many other

countries may happen in the United States—persons being imprisoned, persecuted, even killed for the faith. To be ready for that, our feet must be *shod with the equipment of the Gospel of peace*. Is there any meaning in the striking paradox that the soldier should be equipped for battle with a declaration of peace? At least this: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The only “power” the Christian can trust is the power of the Spirit, and the way the Spirit presents and is known, is love.

Shield of Faith

One of the most dangerous weapons of ancient warfare was the fiery dart. The heads of arrows would be wrapped with fiber, soaked in pitch, than set afire before they were thrown. A wooden shield could be set afire by them. For that reason, the shields were covered with a layer of hide and were large enough to protect the whole body. Even though the dart may pierce the shield, the fire would be quenched.

What a picture! Faith is a shield, guarding the believer against all attacks of invisible and visible enemies. Be careful, though. Paul never uses the word “faith” glibly, as we moderns do. We use it to refer to what we believe, and of the act of believing. “I have faith,” or “I believe” rolls off our tongue easily because we express ourselves in such vague ways. We may be noting our belief in a person: “I have faith in her,” or indicating our rational assent to certain dogma or beliefs.

For Paul, trustful obedience was always involved in faith. Justified by faith, we live by faith, in trustful obedience of Jesus. This faith, Paul says, will *quench all the fiery darts of the evil one.*”

The highway of life is strewn with the wreckage of Christians who never discovered how to combat “the evil one.” They depend on their own moral strength. Sanctioned and supported by ethical wisdom, high ideals and precepts, committed to social and personal justice and righteousness, they face evil in naked encounter.

But none of those things are ultimately adequate. Moral strength or the driving inspiration of a high ideal, at times wears down, and we wear out. We need more. We need the resources of Christ who stands with us and fights *with* and *for* us against every onslaught of sin. We need the shield of faith.

We need to recover viscerally the meaning of justification by faith, for this is good news not merely at the point of our acceptance, but in the resource for daily living it gives us. Faith, our trustful obedience, our utter commitment and dependence upon Christ for *daily*, as well as ultimate salvation, is our only shield.

The Sword of the Spirit—the Word of God

The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, and that word “*is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword*” (Heb. 4:12). We have to determine to be rooted in Scripture, become biblical people, for the Scripture is the primary source of knowing God’s Word.

But the challenge of Paul’s suggestion is that the Christian may be open to and can always depend on receiving the needed word from God. It may be a word of comfort for one’s emotional turmoil, a word of hope for one’s quivering soul, a word of courage for trembling knees, a word of challenge to one’s apathy, a word of condemnation for one’s sin, a word of prophetic judgment for one’s uninvolved and insensitivity. It may also be the word which the Christian is to *speak*—witness to be made, judgment to be shouted, prophecy to be uttered, teaching to be shared.

Our sword, then, is the Bible, but it is more. It is the word of the Bible made alive by the Spirit for our being stirred up in Jesus. The Word of God is also the inbreaking of Christ, the Word made flesh, huh?, by His Spirit speaking to our spirits, and through our spirits to others.

And in this way we win the battles with the principalities and powers and rulers of the darkness of this age. Amen.

