

THE ARMOR OF GOD

Ephesians 6:10-20

In the Sixth Century B.C., the Chinese general Sun Tsu wrote a military treatise called *The Art of War*. Over the millennia this treatise has influenced countless military campaigns and commanders, including such men of renown as General Douglas McArthur.

One of the most familiar strategies in *The Art of War* is “know your enemy”. Know the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses, appearance and location, supply lines and weapons. Actually, this strategy is important for any conflict or competition, whether the opponent is Al Qaeda, a life-threatening illness, a business competitor, or a rival football team. Know the opponent. Know the enemy.

Yet, knowing the enemy is not enough. To win, you must also know yourself; your own strengths and weaknesses. As Sun Tsu wrote in *The Art of War*: “If you know yourself and your enemy, you can win a hundred battles without jeopardy.” This is sound advice. And we find this advice not only in the writings of Sun Tsu, but more importantly, in the pages of Holy Scripture—particularly in the words of Ephesians 6:10-20, which could rightly be called *The Art of Spiritual War*.

Ephesians 6:10-20 is an urgent “call to arms” for every Christian. It describes a spiritual warfare in which every Christian is enlisted because of his Christianity and faith. This is not a spiritual warfare we can ignore or watch with disinterest on FOX News or CNN. Nor is it a spiritual warfare in some remote jungle, or a warfare from which we can claim exemption. This is our struggle. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12, “**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood.**” Ours. Yours. Mine.

Paul describes this struggle in military terms. In Ephesians 6:11,13 he refers to the ARMOR OF GOD. In verses 14-17 he itemizes each piece of that armor. In verse 12 he uses the word “against” five times to emphasize the seriousness and extent of the opposition: “**For our struggle is not *against* flesh and blood, but *against* the rulers, *against* the authorities, *against* the powers of this dark world and *against* the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**” Verse 12 also presents Satan’s army—rulers, authorities, powers, forces—as if organized in

military ranks; almost like PFCs, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, with Satan as the commanding general.

Additionally, Ephesians 6:10-20 contains several imperative verbs. An imperative verb is a command that conveys a sense of urgency. Think of them as “marching orders”. If you saw the movie *A Few Good Men* starring Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise, you may remember Nicholson’s character saying: “Son, we follow orders. We follow orders or men die. It’s that simple. Are we clear?” *Yes, sir.* “We clear?” *Crystal clear, sir.*

And so, in Ephesians 6:10, **“Be strong in the Lord”** is an imperative verb. In verse 11, **“Put on the full armor of God”** is an imperative verb. The same marching order is repeated in verse 13, **“Put on the full armor of God.”** In verse 14, **“Stand firm”** is an imperative verb. And in verse 17, **“Take the helmet of salvation”** is an imperative verb.

And like Sun Tsu in *The Art of War*, the apostle Paul urged his readers to know their enemy, the devil; his origin, power, cunning, designs, names, appearances, weapons, and schemes. In fact, this word too, SCHEMES—from the Greek word METHODEIA, the source of our English “method” and “methodology”—has a military flavor. Satan’s attacks are not poorly planned skirmishes but strategic campaigns. He observes our weaknesses and circumstances and, if possible, exploits them: illness, disagreeable neighbor, financial difficulties, marital troubles, and so on.

Through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the devil is a defeated enemy. As stated Hebrews 2:14-15, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might DESTROY him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”** Or 1 John 3:8, **“The reason the Son of God appeared was to DESTROY the devil’s work.”** And Jesus did do this by His death and resurrection.

Yet, though a defeated enemy, the devil remains a *dangerous* enemy—like any trapped or cornered beast with no escape and nothing left to lose. This is why Scripture urges us: **“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing**

firm in the faith,” 1 Peter 5:8-9. It was our dear Irene Hopfinger who mentioned to me one Sunday after Bible Class: “The lion always hunts the weakest, most defenseless prey.”

Knowing our enemy, the devil, also means knowing that **“our struggle is not against flesh and blood,”** Ephesians 6:12. Satan is not a conventional enemy against which conventional weapons of war will work: flame-throwers, bunker-busters, grenades, missiles, or nuclear bombs.

How then can we overcome the devil’s wiles, warfare, deceit, and trickery? **“When the day of evil comes,”** as Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:13—and notice, not if it comes but when it comes, because it will come—should we attempt to face the evil alone? Should we confront evil, or God forbid, purposely expose ourselves to evil, thinking, “I’m strong enough and wise enough to overcome this temptation”? Or should we rely upon the wisdom and power of God? The devil may be strong; but God is omnipotent. The devil may be cunning; but God is omniscient. The devil may roam about, but God is omnipresent.

When we are tempted, whatever the temptation—the temptation to sin; the temptation to hate; the temptation to seek revenge, lose hope, blame God, worry, be unfaithful in a marriage—then and there the marching orders of Ephesians 6:10-20 call upon us to **“be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.”** And dear friends, if you do that, if you turn to the Lord and make Him your strength, the world, the sinful nature, and all the forces of hell itself, will never be able to defeat you. Never. You will, as Paul promised twice in our text, **“stand firm”** and **“stand your ground”**. Just as Jesus told Peter: **“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,”** Matthew 16:18.

When I write a sermon, I begin by translating the original Hebrew or Greek into English. Next, I meditate on the text for several days, consult commentaries, make notes. Depending on scheduling, I write the first drafts of the sermon with pencil and paper. By the time I’m ready to transfer the final version of the sermon to my computer, the floor in my study usually is littered with crumpled, ripped, and folded notebook paper.

As I was writing this sermon, I had various concerns on my mind. The devil knew it too. I’m certain he was trying to exploit my worries, trying to distract me

from my work. But when I least expected it, my eyes fell on a single piece of wrinkled notebook paper on which days before I had scrawled the words sideways: **“Be strong in the Lord.”** And suddenly, I had the answer to my worries. I had the means to defeat the enemy. The very words that told me to be strong in the Lord were the words to give me the Lord’s strength.

When Paul urged the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, he was using a powerful analogy for “clothe yourself with the word of God. Live it. Breathe it. Study it. Sing it. Wear it. Memorize it. Rejoice in it. Grow in your understanding of it. For it is the word of God that will make you strong and give you the means to defeat the devil.”

You and I have this same God, His same strength, His same promises and His same word. What remains is for us to put God’s word on and leave it on, so that it will always be there to protect us. Do this now. Don’t wait for a battle or a problem or an unexpected illness or a troubled marriage. Leave no area of your life weak and exposed to the enemy.

As a Roman citizen, Paul was very familiar with Roman soldiers. In fact, when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he was in a Roman prison. **“I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus,”** he said in Ephesians 3:1. In the closing words of today’s text, he referred to himself as **“an ambassador in chains,”** Ephesians 6:20.

So, when Paul described the armor of God, he was likely picturing the armor of a Roman soldier; and perhaps even looking at the armor of the soldiers who were guarding him. Without question, Roman legionnaires were among the best equipped, best trained, and best disciplined soldiers in antiquity. When Paul listed the armor in Ephesians 6:14-17, he did so in the exact order in which a Roman soldier put his armor on. First, the belt. Then the breastplate. Then the shoes, shield, helmet, and sword. Each piece of armor had an important purpose. And in today’s text each piece of that armor represents some aspect or attribute of the word of God.

First, the belt of truth. Roman soldiers put their belt on first because it prevented their tunic from hindering their movement during battle. The belt also helped keep the breastplate in place, and held such weapons as a sword and dagger. In the same way, truth is central to the Holy Scriptures. And the Scriptures are completely truthful because, as Paul told Timothy, they are inspired by God. This is

why we rely on God's word in matters of faith, doctrine, and life to the exclusion of anything else. This is also why the devil attacks the word of God more than anything else. He is a liar and cannot abide the truth. "Did God really say that?" was the first temptation in Eden. And the enemy has used this METHODEIA or strategy ever since—regrettably with considerable success.

However, Jesus said in John 17:17, "**Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth.**" He also said in Matthew 24:35, "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.**" And this means that everything God tells us in the Scriptures—about creation, about salvation, about forgiveness in Christ, about eternal life, about trusting Him, about Him never failing us or forsaking us, about His coming again to judge the world—is utterly truthful and reliable. And it is this belt of truth that provides the solid basis for all the other pieces of God's armor and joins every word and teaching of Scripture together.

Second, the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate protected or covered the vital organs of a Roman soldier, especially the heart. And it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that covers and protects our troubled hearts from guilt, condemnation, and the accusations of the devil. When the devil accuses us—the name "devil" means "accuser"—of wrongdoing and sin, we can reply using the truthfulness of Scripture: "**There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,**" Romans 8:1. Or, "**God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,**" 2 Corinthians 5:21. Or, "**The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin,**" 1 John 1:7.

Third, shoes; or in the language of the text: "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." At its zenith, Rome governed an empire that stretched from Italy to Spain and Turkey and covered an area of over one million square miles. Most historians attribute Rome's success to its army and its expansive road system. But foot-soldiers required good shoes. The shoes of a Roman soldier were called *caligae*. These were thick-soled, hob-nailed shoes which protected the feet during long marches and provided traction on slippery terrain.

In a far greater way, it is the gospel of peace—the announcement of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ—that gives us traction in life and keeps us marching forward through every temptation and every trouble. "**Peace I leave with you,**" said Jesus in John 14:27. "**My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the**

world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Amid all the bad news in our world, in our nation, and in our personal lives, the gospel of salvation through Christ is truly good news. And that, of course, is what the word gospel means: GOOD NEWS.

Fourth, the shield of faith. The shield of a Roman soldier was about four feet tall and curved in a way to protect the body from swords, spears, and arrows. Our faith in Jesus Christ shields us from the temptations, attacks, and accusations of the devil. And faith is simply taking God at His word.

If God says that He will save you, He will. If God says that He will deliver you from trouble, He will. If God says that He will provide for your daily needs, He will. It is faith in God through Jesus Christ that acts like a shield, extinguishing all Satan’s fiery arrows of fear, doubt, worry, despair, and hopelessness. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:16, **“Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”** Or as Peter said 1 Peter 5:9, **“Resist him, standing firm in the faith.”**

Fifth, the helmet of salvation. The helmet protected the head of a Roman soldier. Similarly, God’s helmet of salvation protects and focuses the Christian’s mind. Thinking about God’s love, God’s forgiveness, God’s promises, and God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, sets our mind, as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:2, **“on things above, not on earthly things.”** When worried, put on God’s helmet of salvation. When depressed, put on God’s helmet of salvation. When hopeless, put on God’s helmet of salvation. Protect your mind from unhappy thoughts by thinking about the loving, forgiving, saving, and happy thoughts God has for you in Jesus Christ.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians: **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Sixth and finally, the sword of the Spirit, “which is the word of God”. Sword, after all, is the term WORD with an “s”. The writer of Hebrews said: **“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,”** Hebrews 4:12.

Jesus wielded the word of God like a sword when tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Again and again the Savior said: “It is written. It is written. It is written.” Before the power and truth of the word of God, the devil has no alternative but to retreat in defeat.

And so the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, is the weapon that enables us to cut down all the lies, all the doubts, all the false arguments and hellish temptations of the devil. As Luther wrote in his great Reformation anthem: “Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us; we tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us. This world’s prince may still scowl fierce as he will. He can harm us none. He’s judged; the deed is done. One little word can fell him.”

Put on the full armor of God, the word of God. And never take it off. Or in the lyrics of another hymnist:

“Soldiers of Christ, arise
And put your armor on.
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through His eternal Son.” LH 450:1