

# STRONG IN JESUS

Ephesians 6:10-20

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost\* (Series B)

September 9, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon today is based on the epistle lesson from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 6, verses 10 through 20. It is on page 830 of the pew Bible. In this reading, Paul describes Jesus as armor, which has been given to us to protect us from the evil one. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ephesians 6, beginning at verse 10, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; <sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, <sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, <sup>19</sup> and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

There is a battle, and we, dear Christians, are caught up in it. The bad news is that our enemy in this battle is too strong for us. He is stronger, he is smarter, and he's been at this for a long time. To make matters worse, we can't even see him to fight him. He has power, he has weapons, he has deception, and he has stealth. To be completely blunt and honest with you, we have absolutely zero chance of fighting him and winning. Our first parents—Adam and Eve—they weren't even sinners yet, and they couldn't stand against him.

That's the bad news, and I realize that it doesn't sound very inspiring. Imagine a movie scene where a general is giving his pre-battle pep talk, and he says, "A day may come when the courage of men fails ... and it's definitely today; you have no chance. Just run away. Bravely run away." That wouldn't make for a very inspiring movie. But it's the reality we face against our enemy. And that's the bad news.

The good news is that we have a champion who fights for us. In fact, he has already fought and triumphed against this enemy. The battle we are caught up in has actually been won

already for us. What we experience, then, are only the enemy's parting blows. And for this, our champion has given us his armor to wear.

---

This passage is the conclusion to *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. He ties together many of the themes he's already discussed into this image of the armor of God. We've heard already about "put[ting] on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24).

That's baptismal language. In Galatians Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Baptism has this imagery of putting off the old self and putting on Jesus Christ and his righteousness. It's like a robe that covers us. Anytime the Scriptures talk about putting something on, it's a reminder of our Baptisms—that we were clothed with Christ then, and whenever God tells us to put something on, it's a call to return to our Baptisms in repentance and faith.

So earlier in Ephesians Paul says to "put on the new self." And that's the same idea as putting on the armor of God, because, when we compare the different pieces of armor with statements Paul has already made in Ephesians, we realize that every part of the armor is really about Jesus. Putting on the armor of God is nothing other than putting on Christ, or putting on the new self that is created in Christ's righteousness.

In chapter one we heard about "the word of *truth*, the *gospel* of our *salvation*" (1:13). Compare that to "the belt of truth" (6:14) and "the gospel of peace" (6:15). Paul has already talked about *salvation* in Christ that comes only through *faith* in Christ (2:8). Compare that to "the helmet of salvation" (6:17) and "the shield of faith" (6:16). He's talked about being recreated in the *righteousness* of Christ (4:24). Compare that to "the breastplate of righteousness" (6:14). And he's talked about the *Holy Spirit* (4:4) and "the word of truth" (1:13). Compare that to "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6:17).

So there's not really anything new here. Every piece of the armor of God is something Paul has already taught. But he's wrapping everything up together and showing how all of it is a gift from God, in Jesus Christ, so that we might stand firm in Jesus' strength against the attacks of the devil. That's the purpose of all this armor—standing firm in Jesus' strength against the attacks of the devil. The point is not for us to go on the offensive against the devil. God never calls us to do that. He sent one man—a champion for us—to fight against the devil.

And I'm using the term "champion" by its old definition. Maybe you've heard it used this way, maybe you haven't, so I'll explain what I mean. In modern usage, the word "champion" typically just refers to whoever the winner is. If it's a team sport, everyone on the winning team is a champion. But according to its older definition, you could only have one champion. The champion was the top fighter in your army. So if two armies came against each other, and neither side really wanted a whole bunch of people to die, they might say, "Send out your champion!" And then each side would send out one guy who would fight as a representative for his army. And the key word here is "representative." If your guy wins the fight, then your side wins the whole battle. And whoever lost, that guy's army would have to concede the battlefield and go home.

The Old Testament example of this was David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17). Goliath was the champion for the Philistines, and he challenged the Israelites to send someone out to fight him. You know the story: none of the Israelite soldiers were brave enough to fight him, but David, a

shepherd boy, was like, “I got this.” So David slung a stone and hit Goliath in the head. Then he took Goliath’s sword and cut off his head. When the Philistine army saw this, they all ran away, and Israel won the battle.

But the point of the story isn’t that if we’re brave enough, and if we really believe God is on our side, then we can slay the giants just like David did. That’s the view of the Bible that thinks it’s all about us. But the Bible isn’t about us. The Bible is about God redeeming the world through Jesus Christ. Always remember that. And when we remember that the Bible is about Jesus, then we see that the story of David defeating Goliath points ahead to Jesus Christ—the Son of David who came as representative for all of humanity and triumphed over sin, death, and the devil for us. The story of David and Goliath isn’t really about courage. It’s not about overcoming the obstacles in your life. It’s about establishing this principle that one person can come and fight on behalf of the many. So a thousand years after David single-handedly defeated the enemy of Israel, the promised Messiah came in the line of David and defeated our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. That’s what I mean when I say that Jesus is our champion. He is the one who fought and won *for* us. And he did it by himself.

---

So we are not actually called to go and fight our enemies. And we are certainly not called to go and fight the devil. In our pride, we might think that’s what the armor of God is for, but it’s not. There is no command to go on the offensive here. The commands given to us in this passage are to put on the armor (6:11), stand (6:14), and pray (6:18). It’s all about defending us from the evil one and praying for our God to come and fight for us.

This passage about the armor of God is misunderstood a lot. I don’t really know any gentler way to put it. And I’m concerned about the false teachings out there, because false teaching leads people into danger. And that’s bad. Watch out for it. So whenever you hear someone—anyone—talking about the armor of God, listen to see if they’re talking about what we are supposed to do or what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. Because every part of the armor of God is about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And listen to see if they’re talking about our strength or Jesus’ strength, because we don’t have any strength of our own.

From the beginning of this passage in verse ten, we see right away that it’s not about our strength. It’s “Be strong in the *Lord* and in the strength of *his* might” (6:10). The term “Lord,” by the way, especially in the New Testament, is a term for Jesus Christ. That, of course, isn’t to diminish the Father or the Holy Spirit. They’re strong too, but this text is specifically talking about being strong in Jesus. Jesus is the strong man. Jesus is the champion.

And so Jesus gives us his armor, and the purpose of this armor is for us to be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

---

Now when we talk about our enemies, this text helps us remember that our enemies are not flesh and blood. Even people who *act* hostile to us—people who might threaten our freedom or our reputations or our way of life—these people are not our enemies. They might consider Christians to be their enemies, but Christians are not to think of other people as enemies. They are human beings whom God loves and desires “to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Always remember that.

The enemies of the Church are “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). These are the enemies, and we are given armor so that we might stand firm against their

attacks. And the armor is all defensive. We are not called to go and fight against the devil and his demons. I don't even know how we would begin to do that. We are given armor so that we might *stand*. And we are commanded to pray, for our God is the one who fights for us.

---

Some of the pieces of armor are more obviously defensive, like the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, and the shield of faith. But the whole set is really defensive. There's nothing offensive about it all. And I'll explain that.

If you happen to google the phrase "armor of God" and then scroll through all the images, you'll see a lot of small to medium sized shields and some big broadswords. And if you're going on the attack, you want a shield that's small enough to run around with and a big sword. But that's not the kind of armor Paul describes here. I'll explain.

There were different kinds of shields in the ancient world. Some were big, and some were small. The kind of shield Paul talks about is a big shield (θυρεός). The word for it actually derives from the Greek word for "door" (θύρα). They were about two and a half feet wide and four feet tall (Winger, 714). And this was when people were shorter too. So if the enemy was shooting arrows at you, you could squat down and bravely hide behind it. And sometimes soldiers would soak their shields in water the night before a battle. That way, if the enemy lit their arrows on fire, the shield would extinguish the fire instead of catching on fire (Winger, 716). And so Paul talks about how the shield of faith extinguishes "the flaming darts of the evil one" (6:16). Now if you're going to go on the attack, you don't want a big waterlogged shield. But if you just need a place to hide while the enemy shoots flaming arrows at you, that's exactly the kind of shield you want. And that's the kind of faith God grants us in Christ Jesus. We trust in Jesus as our champion, and the devil's attacks cannot destroy us.

So sometimes I've heard people say that the "sword of the Spirit" is the only offensive piece in the armor of God. But that's not even true. Remember, we are not called to go on the attack; we are given armor so that we might stand. There were different kinds of swords too, just like there were different kinds of shields. And the word Paul uses (μάχαιρα) often refers to a short sword, not a big broadsword. And swords are used just as much for defense as they are for offense. If someone comes at you with a sword, the best thing you can use to defend yourself is another sword. If you ever watch fencing or Star Wars or anything like that, if you pay attention, you'll notice that they use their swords—or lightsabers—more for defense than for offense. You use it to knock away your opponent's sword. And especially if your enemy is stronger than you, you just use your sword to protect yourself.

So the Word of God is given to us so that we might knock away the devil's temptations.

This is exactly what Jesus did when he was tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). And Jesus, of course, is stronger than the devil. So he could have just squashed the devil like a bug, but that wasn't his purpose at that moment. At that moment his purpose was to stand in our place and resist the devil's temptations. And so he used the Word of God to knock away the devil's temptations. Three times the devil came at Jesus and tempted him to do something evil. First it was to use his power for selfish purposes (Matt. 4:3), then it was to test God (Matt. 4:6), then it was to actually worship the devil (Matt. 4:9). But all three times Jesus said, "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10), and then he quoted Scripture to knock away the devil's attack. So picture the devil attacking Jesus with a sword, and every time Jesus says, "It is written," it's like swinging his

## STRONG IN JESUS (Ephesians 6:10-20)

sword and knocking away the devil's attack. The Word of God is our defense against the devil's temptation.

We are tempted in many ways. We are tempted to commit obvious sins. We are tempted to believe false doctrine. We are tempted to despair because of all the evil we see around us. But in every situation we ask, *What does God's Word say?* And so we use the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, to knock away the devil's attacks.

---

God has given us all this armor as our protection against the attacks of the devil. He has given Jesus Christ to us, who is *"the way, the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6). He is our righteousness. The gospel of peace is simply the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of our sins. We trust in Jesus, and he is "a shield for all those who take refuge in him" (Ps. 18:30). He is our salvation. And he is even the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Everything about the armor of God screams "Jesus." To put it on simply means to put on Christ. And then we stand, not in our own strength, but in his. When the devil accuses us of sin, so what? For Jesus has given us his own righteousness to wear as a breastplate. To put on the armor of God simply means to put on Christ. He is our champion. He is the one who already did the work of defeating sin, death, and the devil for us, and now he continues to be our armor.

The battle is already won. As the devil tries to get his parting shots in, we take up Jesus. He was strong enough to win the battle, and he is strong enough to preserve us until the end. Amen.

---

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.