

"Put On the Whole Armor of God"

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Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For 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. Therefore 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Prayer.

There are some things we must do in this world
That we'd prefer not to do them alone:
Facing a judge, over whom your fate rests;
Suffering, pain, death, and grief of a loved one;
Having the doctor come and tell you life-changing results.
Some things are best done with someone else;
Someone to stand by your side.

Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament,
Are filled with descriptions of God acting alone
For our benefit:
Our passage from Ephesians leads me think of Isaiah 59,
Where the Lord sees us groping

"Like the blind along a wall."¹

"The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm brought him victory,

¹ Isaiah 59:10 NRSV

and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.
According to their deeds, so will he repay;
wrath to his adversaries,
requit to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render requit.
So those in the west shall fear the name of the Lord,
and those in the east, his glory;
for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of the Lord drives on.
And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord."²

Isaiah's experience of God is that God goes at it alone,
Clothed as a soldier
Acting alone on our behalf.
Six hundred years after the prophet Isaiah,
After God's pinnacle, signature, solo action,
Sending us Jesus Christ, his one and only son,
Allows the apostle Paul to write in the last half of the first century
In such a way that advances this metaphor to a whole new level.
As Susan Hylen from Vanderbilt University writes,
Now, "it is the community of the faithful that takes up this armor.
They do so "in the Lord,"
which suggests that they wage this battle alongside the Lord."³
God is no longer going at it on his own.
We are no longer isolated and alone.
Here we see a unique and unfolding expression
Of the Church's role in justice and salvation.
By taking up God's armor,
We, the community, become active participants in the spiritual struggle between
Good and bad,
Redemption and condemnation,
Heaven and hell.

The apostle Paul places the Body of Christ
Into the central and absolutely essential role of partner with our God.

² Isaiah 59:15b-20 NRSV

³ With thanks for extensive thoughts on this passage by Susan Hylen, Mellon Assistant Professor of New Testament, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, as found at:
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/30/2009#

We grow into his body,
We have been raised up with Christ
and seated with him in the heavenly places.⁴
We are full partners with God,
Side-by-side,
Sharing the responsibility, humanity with the Divine,
In the cosmic struggle
“against the spiritual forces of evil.”⁵
The Greek verbs we hear are action verbs:
- be strong, strengthen yourselves
- take up, put on, gird yourself
- clothe yourselves, wrap yourself with the power of God
that the Lord might protect you,
and work through you,
to bring you strength.
We will never be alone again.

I know most of us have this image of heaven
As a place of eternal peace and tranquility,
Where we are reunited with the spirits of our deceased loved ones
And live for eternity in paradise.
But this vision is wholly modern, western
And is not shared by the apostolic author of Ephesians.
How does Paul view heaven?
As a place where the spiritual forces of darkness and evil dwell
and are engaged in battle with God and his saints.
This war is depicted by Michelangelo’s fresco “The Last Judgment”
Painted on the wall of the Sistine Chapel.
With Jesus passing judgment in the center,
Newly departed souls are grasping to be brought up,
Angels above that are pulling them up,
While at the same time,
Personified powers of darkness are attempting to pull them down.
Until the day of the final judgment
The Church,
The Body of Christ,
The community of sinners on the road of improvement to become the community of saints,
WE, my friends,
Are to be on the front lines of the battle,
Side-by-side with our Lord,
Engaged in the glorious fight against all things evil
Reaching, pulling, holding on for dear life every soul that reaches up to us.

⁴ Ephesians 2:6 NRSV

⁵ Ephesians 6:12 NRSV

Others are dependent upon our success.
The Lord is counting on us to hold the moral and ethical high ground
And to never surrender it,
Not now, not ever.
No erosion of truth.
No enabling with justifying excuses.

The line we draw in the sand,
Is a line of truth.
We don't compromise on the truth.
It is a line of righteous behavior,
Living according to the will of God,
According to God's commandments and Christ's instructions.
Partners with God in this cosmic struggle
Must never compromise on peace.
There are no just wars; all wars are immoral and contrary to God's will.
Every act of violence is a violation of God's standards.
A battle for peace sounds like an oxymoron,
When actually it is a call for the prevention of violence.
Our neighbors do not react with violence if we have acted with righteousness and treated them
with justice.
This is true on a personal scale, and on a global scale.

The shield of faith,
The helmet of salvation,
The sword of the Spirit,
Are each foundational characteristics, essential for victory over darkness and evil, upon which
we must stand and persevere.
One of the most dangerous aspects of this fight is when we under-estimate the strength of evil.
I don't personally like or believe in a physical devil,
(evil, red man with a pitchfork)
but if this helps us take seriously what is truly at stake,
and to calculate the true strength of what we are up against,
then I'm all for it.
To be under prepared, is to be lost.
To let our faith slide and our guard down, is to face certain death.
To not always act with the mind and behaviors of the Holy Spirit, is to become the idol we so
bitterly detest.
This is the only war worth fighting
For it has no violence.
This is the only battle worth engaging,
For by doing so, we become unified partners with God.
This is the only confrontation we should welcome,
For the struggle for the minds and hearts of humanity

Rests solely upon our faith, our strength, and our stubborn perseverance.
The word of the Lord.
Amen.