

PENTECOST 13 – August 22, 2010

Ephesians 6:10-20 **PUT ON THE FULL ARMOR OF GOD**

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Fellow soldiers in the army of the Lord,

In our gospel reading for today, our Savior Jesus made the startling remark that he had not come to bring peace on earth, but division. That may sound strange to our ears, especially in light of the words of the Christmas angels who sang that there would be peace for those on whom God's favor rests. Is there a contradiction here? How do we explain it?

The point Jesus was making is that when believers are joined together in relationships with those who don't believe, there is going to be friction. There is going to be division even among members of the same family. That's because, when we as Christians are truly living our faith, when we are proclaiming God's word in all its truth and purity, when we hold up Jesus as the only way to heaven and as the one who directs every aspect of our lives, that is going to bring us into sharp conflict with those who are living by a completely different philosophy. We will be thrown on the defensive when it comes to practicing our faith, and when it comes to proclaiming the judgments of God's Word on those who are living contrary to it. We are going to be challenged from many sides. The temptations will come in many different ways to compromise our faith, to water down the truths of the Bible, to tolerate any and every kind of teaching and behavior. That's the division Jesus talked about in our gospel. That's the division so graphically displayed in our OT reading when the godly priest Jehoiada finally stood up against the wicked, idol worshipping queen mother, Athaliah.

What I'm trying to say is that we as Christians are involved in a monumental battle, the battle for our souls. Now, we know that the war has already been decided. Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, defeated our spiritual enemy, Satan, by his perfect life and by his innocent suffering and death on the cross. Jesus showed that he was victorious by his triumphant resurrection from the grave on Easter morning. And we share in that victory as the Holy Spirit powerfully goes to work in human hearts through the gospel in word and sacrament, bringing us to faith, leading us to put our trust in Jesus for our eternal futures. But the battle for our individual souls is still on. Satan is trying to lead us away from Christ.

That's why Paul writes the way he does here. He was in a very thick part of the battle at the moment when he wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus. He was in a prison cell in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. He didn't know what the outcome was going to be, whether he would be released, or whether he would be executed because of his work of proclaiming Jesus as the only way to heaven. In these words, he's warning the Christians of the first century and of the 21st century that the same kinds of things could happen to us, that we will face the same temptations and challenges which he did. How do we survive? How do we remain true to our Savior and his Word? There's only one answer for us Christian soldiers:

PUT ON THE FULL ARMOR OF GOD

We need it because the enemy is fierce. We need it because it's the best and only protection there is.

We need to put on the full armor of God because of the enemy we are facing. He's a lot stronger than we are. On our own we don't have any natural defenses. In fact he's got a spy inside each one of us, our own sinful nature. It's been there since we were born and it puts us on the wrong side of the war right from the start. That makes us easy prey for the enemy. By ourselves we are totally helpless against his attacks and would end up in hell. This enemy, of

course, is Satan, the great accuser, liar and schemer, along with his fellow evil angels, the demons.

What do we know about this enemy? We know and believe that he's not some funny cartoon character in red long-johns with a spiked tail and a pitchfork. He's not just some imaginary bogie man invented just to scare people into being good. He's very real. The Bible tells us that for some reason, shortly after God finished his perfect creation of heaven and earth, some of the angels rebelled against him. So God threw them out of heaven. Their leader is this Satan and their sole intention now is to continue the rebellion against God. They will do anything and everything to get back at God. And the way they have chosen is to destroy the relationship between God and his highest creatures, us human beings.

Paul says here that the devil is a schemer. He's smart. He's sneaky. He's got all kinds of dirty tricks up his sleeve. He's diabolical and cunning. As Martin Luther wrote in his great "Mighty Fortress" hymn, **The old evil foe now means deadly woe, deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight; on earth is not his equal.** He will make the Christian life a real struggle. Attacks on our faith will take the form of temptations and trials. There will be temptations to yield on points of teaching that the Bible makes. Or if he can't undermine our beliefs, he will try to get us to relax our moral standards, chipping away with arguments like, "Well everyone is doing it." Or, "We really love each other anyway." Or "We just living together for financial reasons, and besides we don't need that piece of paper from the government." If Satan can't seduce us into great big outward sins, he will lead us into thinking that we are good enough in God's sight all by ourselves. The point is, he'll do anything to separate us from God by trying to destroy our devotion to the Savior.

And we dare never think that we can stand against these schemes of Satan by ourselves. **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.** This is not just a simple wrestling match where one guy tries to pin his opponent's shoulders to the mat for a second or two. This is a life and death struggle. Our eternal future is on the line. It's hand to hand combat with a being more powerful than we are on our own. Peter uses the picture of a lion to describe the devil, a creature that will tear us apart.

So you can be sure that you will face these attacks. The evil day will come upon all of us sooner or later. Some of these temptations are greater than others. It might be some physical catastrophe which leads us to thinking that God doesn't care about us anymore. Maybe some sin becomes particularly appealing, like excessive gambling, greed and materialism, or sexual sins. It happened to great heroes of the Bible, like Job, David, Joseph and Peter, so we can be absolutely sure that the devil and his evil angels will confront us.

II.

That's why we need to take Paul's encouragement to heart, **Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.** Our only source of strength against the devil is God himself and the weaponry he provides. He's the power source to which we must be connected. Our eternal destiny is at stake. Besides, it's the best protection, the only defense system there is. Why would we not want to put on the full armor of God?

Remember where Paul was, in Rome as a prisoner, chained to a Roman soldier. What better picture could Paul have to describe the armor the soldier in God's army should have.

The first thing the soldier put on was his belt, a heavy leather sash meant to protect his lower abdomen and to which he could attach other equipment. Paul says we Christians need to buckle on God's belt of truth. We need to know from God's Word what's right and what's wrong. God's standard is the only one that counts. Satan and the world will present all kinds of lies and deceptive philosophies for life. The only thing that can expose them for what they are is

the truth, the truth which God himself establishes for us in his word. That's why it's so important for us to keep studying that word, being here and in Bible class and in personal Bible study, so that we can spot those lies and keep from caving in to them.

The next thing the Roman soldier put on was his breastplate. Today we would compare it to a bullet-proof vest. It protected the back and upper body. Our breastplate as Christians is righteousness. One of the most common traps of the devil is trying to get us to feel that God can't possibly forgive us because our sins are too big, that Jesus' righteousness just can't cover our sins. So people fall into despair and depression. Or the other side of the coin is that they think they are such good people that they don't need Christ's forgiveness, that they are right in God's sight all by themselves. When we stay rooted in God's word we will cherish the fact that we are holy and righteous before God simply through faith in the blood of Christ. His work is our protection from eternal death and damnation. As the hymn writer put it, **Jesus, your blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress.**

Everybody here is wearing shoes, right? They are vitally important for soldiers. They enabled him to march over rough and difficult terrain and to maintain his footing in battle. Our footwear is **the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.** Paul calls it that because we have peace through the good news that Jesus has forgiven all our sins. We are right with God. We have a place in his kingdom, as members of his family. We don't have to be frantically running all over the place when facing a spiritual battle. When we have the gospel of peace, we are ready and able to stand up against the tempter. We have a firm foundation, are standing on solid ground.

Next comes the shield which protected the whole body by deflecting the arrows, javelins and stones hurled by the enemy. For us, using the shield of faith means we will be able to ward off the flaming arrows of the evil one, his deadly temptations, the sinful influences of the world around us, even the pointed darts of our own sinful nature. Holding to that shield of faith, faith created in us by the Spirit in baptism and through the word we can resist and extinguish Satan's arrows. Let your faith slide by neglecting the word and you open yourself up to all kinds of attacks.

To protect his head the soldier put on a helmet. For us Paul calls it the helmet of salvation, the salvation won for us by our Savior Jesus. We've been rescued from the guilt and punishment of sin. We have eternal glory awaiting us. That good news will help us withstand the life-threatening blows of the enemy. When situations in life seem to be knocking us down, we can and will recover because we know that we will live with our Savior in heaven. So don't take off that helmet by reaching for the empty pleasures and attractions of this world which the devil dangles in front of our eyes.

The final piece of the soldier's armor is the sword. For us Paul says it is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. This is the one piece of equipment which is both defensive and offensive. It defends us when the enemy is attacking. We slash away with God's word and the enemy retreats. But we also use it to drive sin and unbelief out of the heart of those who are captured by the enemy. We reach out with that word of God, proclaiming Jesus as Savior and king, so that more and more souls will be touched by the gospel and the Spirit can bring them to faith in Jesus. With the word we can rescue Satan's victims from their eternal fate by sharing with them the good news of salvation.

And then there is one more thing we can use in our battle against Satan and sin. Paul doesn't attach it to any piece of a soldier's equipment, but it's vitally important for us Christians – the privilege of prayer. Here Paul seeks the prayers of Christians for each other and for himself. What a wonderful way to close his picture, inviting us to tap into God's power by going to him directly, asking him to use that power on our behalf in all kinds of situations.

Doing all that, putting on the full armor of God, Paul says that we will stand. We will be victorious when attacked by the devil, the world and our own sinful nature. We will survive when there is division, even in our own families. The war has already been decided in our favor. It happened on the cross when Jesus gave his life to defeat our spiritual enemies. It becomes our victory when we are brought to faith by God's powerful sword, the gospel in word and sacrament. With his full armor we can now stand up against Satan and know with all confidence that we will stand on the great day of Judgment. In the meantime, as we battle against the spiritual forces of evil, we have the best and only protection we need, the full armor of God. Put it on, and win! AMEN.