

Buckle Up: Putting on the Belt of Truth

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[0 : 00] The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at TruthForLife.org. I invite you to turn with me to Ephesians and to chapter 6 and to the passage of Scripture to which we come this morning and which is given the basis for the old song that we've just sung together.

Ephesians 6 and reading from verse 10. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

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.

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. Stand, therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one, and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

[1 : 37] To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak. Amen.

We come, gracious God, entirely dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the truth of your word, to grant us grace in order that we might believe and rest in it.

So accomplish your purposes, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, I hope by now we're clear about a number of things. One, that the same grace which reconciles in Jesus us to God is the same grace which antagonizes us to the evil one.

That, as we are reading here, we're involved in a spiritual battle, a battle which is being fought against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

And that is of significance because, earlier in the letter, Paul has explained to his readers that in our union with Christ, we have been raised up and seated with him in the heavenly places.

[3 : 14] And so, having been removed, as it were, to the reality of being included with Christ, our union with Christ has brought us immediately into conflict with the devil.

And this picture of warfare, although it is shied away from even in the church today, is nevertheless solemn, it is clear, and there is nothing that is, if you like, airy-fairy about it.

Although we are seated in Christ in the heavenly places, we are also living down here on earth. The initial readers were in Ephesus, we are in Cleveland, some of you are from different parts of the world.

And it is in the routine of life, if you like, in the humdrum nature of life, that we face the challenges that are described here in the section we're considering.

And we've tried to make sure, so far, that we are not separating this section at the end of Ephesians from all that has gone before, and particularly from all that we had been considering beginning halfway through chapter 5.

[4 : 28] Because it was there that we began to see what the Bible was saying concerning the nature of marriage, and then the realities and responsibilities of family life, and then the privileges and challenges in our everyday work events.

And we tried to make the point—I reiterate it now purposefully—that it is in these very areas, not exclusively but definitely in these very areas, that many of us become most aware of the fact that we're up against the devil's schemes.

And so, I find it helpful to realize just how solidly realistic Paul is in teaching us in this way, saving us from any sense of naivety or superficiality.

I remember years ago reading a description of troops who had embarked upon a ship in the United Kingdom heading for France.

And the writer describing the scenes on board wrote as follows, If from a group here and there came a song or noisy demonstration, it was from the young soldiers going out to the front for the first time.

[5 : 43] The others remained impassive, silent. Experience had taught them that mere knowledge of their duties and a fleeting devotion would not suffice to bear the long and bitter ordeal of battle.

They required a spirit proved in the crucible of discipline. I find that very helpful as I think about spiritual warfare, the idea that if I just do what I'm supposed to do, or if I have a strong surge of emotion, this will manage to sustain me in the warfare.

That is naive. And those who have battled long with the evil one, who've lived their Christian life over a period of time, know just how naive it is.

And it's for that reason that Paul is urging his readers here to make a stand, to take a stand. We've noticed that. It comes again in 11 and then in 13 and then in 14.

And he doesn't just say to them, Now, go ahead and stand. He always does what he does here. And that is that he reminds them of how they can stand.

[6 : 55] Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. He's already, back in chapter 1, prayed for them that they might have an understanding of the strength and power of God, the immeasurable greatness of his might, he says, towards those who believe, that has been manifested ultimately in the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And so, from the very beginning of his letter, he has wanted his readers to understand their identity in Christ, to understand what it means to be in union with Christ, so that when the exhortations come, they're aware of the fact that divine equipment is required, is essential, if we are going to be successful in dealing with the evil one.

That's why in the hymn that we have just sung, you have that lovely couplet there, The arm of flesh will fail you, you dare not trust your own. You just can't get by by saying, you know, if I feel strongly enough about this, I'm sure I will handle it.

So, the encouragement to be strong in the strength of his might is then followed by his exhortation to take up the armor of God and to put on the armor of God. In passing, it's important to remind ourselves that the picture here is a united picture.

Although we tend to think of this in individualistic terms, as we must in measure, well, what does it mean for me? In actual fact, he's talking about the united front, as it were, of the believers in Ephesus.

[8 : 31] Make sure he's saying to them that together you are equipped for battle. And what he provides us with is an illustration or a picture. And we are looking only at this one phrase in verse 14, having fastened on the belt of truth.

Having fastened on the belt of truth. Now, we know Paul enough to know that his imprisonment meant that he was in the company of soldiers. When he wrote to Philippi, a garrison town, the Roman soldiers were everywhere.

He knew that his readers understood the battle equipment that a Roman soldier enjoyed. And so, there is little doubt that that is in his mind and in the mind of his readers when he speaks in this way.

But I don't think it is actually Paul's underlying picture, as I'll point out to you presently. First of all, though, the belt that was worn by the Roman soldier was not a belt that was provided for decoration.

I was in a store in the last two weeks, and there were a whole series of belt buckles that were quite magnificent. And I thought about, you know, I wasn't going to buy one, but I thought, I suppose this individual doesn't really wear the belt to keep their trousers up as much as to wear the buckle, so that you can say, Oh, what an amazing buckle.

[9 : 58] Yes, but does it keep your trousers up? That's the real question. So, what he's talking about here is not something by way of decoration that we can walk around and display it, but rather

it is foundational.

The Roman would be dressed in flowing garments that would be over armaments many times. And so, the potential for progress being impeded as a result of tripping over your stuff was a real one. And therefore, part of the function of the belt was to be able to secure all that might otherwise affect our ability to move and our readiness. And that, of course, is a picture that runs through the Bible. At one point, Moses is giving instruction to the people of God concerning the eating of the Passover, and the word to them is, In this manner, this is Exodus 12, In this manner you shall eat the Passover with your belt fastened.

That's an interesting thing. You're going to eat the Passover with your belt fastened. Why is that? Well, because of the potential threat of antagonism around them, and therefore, they want to be engaging in the pursuit of God in a way that they are ready to take a stand for God.

[11:17] And that's the picture here. In the English Standard Version, which we're using, it's fastened on the belt. Perhaps in the NIV, it's buckling. I don't actually recall.

But I do recall that in the King James Version, with which many of us were brought up, the phraseology is, Having your loins girt about with truth.

And so that's as good an argument for a more modern translation as any I know. You ask your teenage son as he's going out for the evening with his girlfriend, Let me just ask you before you go, Do you have your loins girt about with truth?

Now, they may come back to you and say, I'm not sure what that means. You tell them, Well, let me tell you exactly what it means. That is the picture that Jesus uses when he speaks to his disciples. He says, Let your loins be girded about.

Translated, Make sure that you stay dressed for action. Or in 1 Peter, when you have the same phraseology, Girding up the loins of your mind.

[12:23] Peter is applying the picture that his readers would understand. You know what it is to grab a hold of things and tuck it into your belt so that you don't trip yourself up and fall over and cause others difficulty.

So he's saying the same thing in relationship to your minds. In other words, in essence, it is a metaphor for preparedness. For preparedness.

There's no sense in which, as you read the letters of the New Testament, the call to the Christian is anything other than really a call to warfare.

I know it's not a very contemporary and acceptable picture, but nevertheless, it is impossible to read the Bible without understanding that that is what is being said. There's no sense of dreamy carelessness.

It's rather a decisive readiness. Now, we understand this in our own day in some measure, don't we? Our cars ring bells to make us buckle up.

[13:24] You will be more secure, and other people will be more secure if you will buckle up. Before you take off on an airliner, they almost inevitably will say, make sure that your seatbelt is fastened low and tight across your lap.

And if you hit turbulence on the way, it's not uncommon for somebody to come on and say, you might want to give your belt just another little tug, which usually is a warning, for you might want to give it a very, very big tug.

But the fact of the matter is, we get the picture. There's a measure, there's a sense of readiness. When you think in terms of austerity, we use the phraseology tightening one's belt.

So that is the picture, and that is understandable to us all. But what I want to say to you and suggest to you, and this is to come back to what I mentioned earlier, that while there is no question that the picture of the Roman soldier is before us, I'm not so sure that that was what was underlying Paul's emphasis here as a Jewish man who had a solid understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Because, you see, the battle with the devil and victory in battle with the devil has been secured, accomplished, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[14:53] And when we've studied the Bible together, we've often said to one another, in the Old Testament, Jesus is predicted, and in the Gospels, he's revealed. He's predicted, anticipated in the Bible, in all kinds of pictures, one of them being that of a mighty warrior.

So, for example, in Psalm 24, that is often sung antiphonally when it is sung in the metrical form, the question that is asked by the worship leader, who... Open up the gates so that the King of glory

may enter.

The one person says, Who is this King of glory? The response comes, The Lord, strong and mighty in battle, He is the King of glory.

Well, who is that? Ultimately, that is Jesus. He is the mighty warrior. He is the one who is valiant in battle. What you have in the Psalms, you have also in the prophecies.

And this, I suggest to you, underlies what Paul is saying here. For example, we read Isaiah 11 routinely, and we often stop short of verse 5, where we have this picture of the mighty warrior striking the earth with the rod of his mouth, and then it says, Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

[16:21] In Isaiah 52, it describes the shoes that are worn by the mighty warrior, pointing forward, How lovely on the mountains are the feet of them that bring good news.

And Paul's saying, a little later on, he says, And your feet need to be shod with the gospel of peace. In Isaiah 59, you have the same thing.

I mean, you can search for this and find it on your own with a good concordance. Isaiah 59, 17, He put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head, and he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and he wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

When you read the Old Testament, you say, Well, who is this? Well, the Bible is pointing forward to the fulfillment in the Lord Jesus. Now, the reason I mention this is because it seems to me that the basic elements of the armor of God come, if you like, from Paul's pen, not simply in light of the picture of the Roman soldier, but in light of his knowledge of the Lord as the divine warrior.

Now, why would this matter, and how would it help? Let me tell you. Do you remember when we studied in the fruit of the Spirit?

[17:46] And when we studied the fruit of the Spirit, we were at pains to make sure we understood that this is actually fruit. We used the picture of a Christmas tree, if I recall, and we said, When you have a Christmas tree, it is possible to hang ornaments on them.

They are external to the tree. They do not emerge from the tree. They have no life in themselves.

And we said, When we read concerning the fruit of the Spirit, this is not things, characteristics, design, or labels that we attach to ourselves spiritually, but it is rather that which is produced by the Holy Spirit within us.

And so we start to warn one another against an approach to the Christian life which essentially said, What you're supposed to do is try and be as much like Jesus as you can, and if you hang a few of those things on yourself, then you will look far more like Jesus than you will if you don't, which is, of course, futility.

Similarly here, and this is why I pointed out, it's possible to read this section as though what Paul is doing is simply urging us to be good, urging us to be good.

You see, wearing the armor here is not about becoming enough like Christ to defeat Satan. Now, you need to understand that.

[19:06] It's not about trying to become more like Jesus so that I might be victorious in the battle. It is about standing confidently in Christ's triumph which has already taken place over Satan in the cross, that Jesus Christ is the valiant warrior who is to come.

He has gone toe-to-toe with the evil one in the wilderness in the temptations. He has answered him in the same way that we are to answer him as we will see later on by taking the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

That's how Jesus handled it there. And in going face-to-face with him in the cross, he has triumphed over the evil one, over death, over sin, over the grave.

He has accomplished all of it. That's why the hymn that we just sang read, Put on the Gospel Armor. Put on the Gospel Armor.

What does it mean, the Gospel Armor? Simply what it says. That our armor is ultimately the gospel. It is to put on the gospel.

[20:18] Let me give it to you in the words of a hymn. Where the writer says to the Lord, Be thou my shield and hiding place You be my shield and hiding place That sheltered near your side I may my fierce accuser face And tell him Thou hast died.

In other words, when the evil one comes to insinuate, to attack, to say, I can't believe that you think those thoughts, I can't believe that you left that undone, I can't believe that you are as you are, and so on, the answer does not lie in our saying, Oh, but wait a minute.

I had a very good week two weeks ago. Did you count that? Or I'm doing this or I'm doing that. No, the answer is to confront our accuser and tell him Jesus died.

Because what are you saying? You're saying, You took your best shot, evil one, and Jesus died, bore our sins, triumphed over them, and we are now in him.

We are united in him. Some of you will have those dolls at home. I think they call them Russian dolls. I have some with Gorbachev on it and Yeltsin and some others.

[21 : 50] And they're fun to play with. You know how they are. You take them apart, and then you go further and further down, and then eventually you've got a tiny little fellow in here who doesn't come apart anymore.

And then, when you've done that, then you put them all back together again. That's about the fun of it for an afternoon. But there is something of a picture in that, isn't there?

That I am the tiny little person enclosed in Christ. You see, when the evil one comes to me and says, No, I'm very strong. I'm making great progress.

I'm feeling amazing. You know, the evil one knows this fellow's going down for sure. No, you see, there's only one place, and the place is safe in the arms of Jesus.

It's hidden in the gospel. That's why, you see, the issue is always the gospel. That's why the issue is, Do I know Christ in this way? Have I come to entrust myself to him?

[22 : 53] Have I admitted who he is and who I am and why I need him and so on? Or am I just a religious person seeking somehow or another to do my best as I make my journey?

There's all the difference in the world. Paul, remember, in chapter 1, is writing to those who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation. Now, the picture, then, is pretty straightforward, isn't it?

The question is, is Paul, then, when he talks about the belt of truth, talking about truth as in truth in the inner man or sincerity or our own personal truthfulness, or is he speaking about truth in an objective sense, that is, in the sense of that which is outside of us and in Christ and in the gospel? Well, without delaying on it, it's possible to marshal the Bible evidence in support of both positions. Paul already has talked about speaking truth with our neighbors in chapter 4, and he does that throughout his letters.

He also, though, is concerned to make sure that people understand the nature of the truth and so on. In my own simplicity of mind, I have concluded that it needn't be either-or and it's probably safe to say it's both-and, that surely to take up the belt of truth is to ensure that since Jesus is the truth and since the gospel has come to us as the truth, one of the evidences that we are truth-trusters is that we are truth-tellers, so that the subjective dimension of the work of grace is in evidence in our lives.

[24 : 48] My inclination, though, is to view what he's saying here in terms of this belt more in the objective way. In other words, what Paul says elsewhere about the importance of the faith or about the gospel or about the good deposit is just seems to me in keeping with the emphasis on the truth itself.

And certainly, when we realize that it is only the truth of the gospel that can dispel the lies of the evil one and set us free. That's why I think Paul is constantly emphasizing this in all of his writings.

As he gets to the end of his life, as he is now in jail for the last time, as he writes his letter to Timothy, what is his great concern for Timothy? It is that Timothy will remain committed to the truth, that he will make sure that the truth of the gospel that has come to him, first through his grandmother and then through his mother, and that has now become his very own, that he will not deviate from course in relationship to it, that he will hold fast to the truth, that he will keep as a pattern of sound words that which has been conveyed to him.

And in that very same letter, he reminds Timothy that he has in his congregation those who are always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

In Ephesians, in the previous chapter, where he has described the provision that God has made for his church in the ministry of the apostles and in the inscripturated truth that the apostles then penned, he says, And the reason God has given this to us is in order that we may no longer be as children, tossed to and fro, carried about by every wave, and by every wind of doctrine.

[26 : 45] What's the key? The belt of truth. That we have come to a conviction about the truth. Somebody said to us one day, Have you ever read the New Testament?

We said, No, I never read it. And we read it. And we discovered that it introduced us to Jesus. And we discovered Jesus not just as a figure of history, but as a Savior and as a friend.

And we entrusted our lives to him. And we declared that Jesus is Lord. And then it was Jesus that gave to us our doctrine of Scripture. We realized that Jesus believed the Bible.

That Jesus taught the Bible. That Jesus spoke the very words that the Father had given him to speak. And so we came to convictions about the truth of the Bible because we came to convictions about the truth concerning Jesus.

That's how it actually happens. And it stands out in distinct confrontation with the vagueness and the accommodation that is increasingly part of our culture.

[27 : 54] Our culture is confused about many things, but it's certainly confused about truth and whether there is such a thing as objective truth. And the pressure is so hard, I don't know how you find it, but it is very hard when you're in company with a group of people who all believe completely differently from yourself.

It's a huge temptation to become a little vague, to become a little accommodating, to suddenly say, well, you know, perhaps tolerance and acceptance will, you know, win the war a little more than truth statements.

But that's one of the schemes of the devil. That's exactly what has happened in churches all across the Western world, ever since, particularly, at the end of the nineteenth century and the thought forms of German scholarship that invaded the minds of many who wanted to be thought very, very wise and effective.

And so they thought, well, if we just demythologize some of this, if we just dismantle some of these pieces, if we just become more frayed on the edges and a little more accommodating, then what we'll find, I'm sure, is that people will just flock to us and they will be delighted to realize that we really don't know what we're talking about at all.

And it will make them feel very comfortable and what has happened. The churches are empty, the lights are off, the doors are closed. And they deserve to be. John Stott, some years ago, makes the amazing statement where he says, just as the world is becoming more aware of its need, the church is becoming less assured of its mission.

[29 : 43] And the major reason for the diminishing Christian mission is the diminishing confidence in the Christian message. Don't you find the pressure? I had a letter this week from somebody who wrote to me saying, I know you teach the Bible, but you need to realize, Alistair, that the Bible was written a long time ago and we have all moved on.

And therefore, the things that you're saying from that Bible are just completely irrelevant. She said, well, there are nice elements to them, but the complexity of modern life is such that the Bible is just obviously inadequate.

Now, what are we going to do with this? What's the response? You might want to give that belt an extra tug. Turbulence.

When our friends say these things, when they say to us, well, you're not very Christian, don't they say that? How can you be so Christian if you're going to define things? If you were Christian, you wouldn't define things.

If you were a really good Christian, you would be far nicer, and you wouldn't be so authoritative, so dogmatic, so jolly annoying. Well, and what they're really saying is, you know, it doesn't really matter what you believe.

[31 : 06] Just as long as you lead a good life and you do your best. Sounds so cozy, doesn't it? And you kind of don't want to go, oh, I don't know about that.

But if you're going to be a Christian soldier, you're going to have to go, oh, I don't know about that. Jesus says to the woman at the well, why don't you go call your husband?

She says, well, I don't have a husband. She said, no, you're right. You've had five husbands, and you've got a live-in lover. Put his finger on her life so that he might give to her the living water.

Define the issues so that she might then be confronted with the truth. If we do not do what Scripture does, then we have no basis upon which to be able to make application of the truth.

For example, we all know John 3.16, and we quote it from time to time, and helpfully so, for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, because we're all going to perish, we're perishing as a result of our sin, would not perish, but would instead have eternal life.

[32 : 28] Whoa. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. Well, that's good, so we don't want to have a spirit of condemnation about us. But in order that the world might be saved through him. Good.

So we want to tell people about the immensity of his love in Jesus. Now, here we go. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

That's pretty defined, isn't it? When our friends tell us that their intelligence will see them through in the end.

When they tell us that modern knowledge is able to sit in judgement over the revelation of God in Scripture.

Where do we turn? We turn to the truth. And with this I will finish. Remember when Paul writes to the Corinthians? And the Corinthians had an interest in things that was fairly rarefied, and they enjoyed high talk.

[33 : 47] And he says to them, When I came to you, I didn't play any of those games. I didn't use any of those cards. And the reason I didn't do it, that I didn't try and impress you with words of human wisdom, was in case the cross of Christ would be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

As our friend David Wells puts it in one of his little booklets, we do not— God is beyond the realm of our intuitive radar. That there is no intellectual road to God.

That the only way we ever know God is by means of his revelation. And he has revealed himself ultimately in he who is the way, the truth, and the life.

[35 : 03] And no one ever comes to the Father except through him. And Paul says, I want to make sure that you understand that my speech, my message, they weren't in plausible words of wisdom, but in a demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Why? So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. So every time you find yourself saying, Oh, but you can't possibly believe that.

Or, don't you realize that science has disproved that? Don't you realize that that was just a perspective from the first century about gender and about marriage?

Don't you realize that we've superseded all of that? Surely you're not saying this, you're not saying that. To the extent that you find yourself sucked into that vortex, I say to you, hide yourself away in the finished work of Christ and tighten the belt and engage in the battle.

This morning, serendipitously, I went into one of the rooms upstairs, and I realized that somebody had left me a copy of *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* by Bunyan, seventeenth-century work by Bunyan.

[36 : 27] Bunyan, he writes of how, as he surveys his life, it's amazing to him, he says, that, given how bad and horrible and useless I am, that God's grace would abound to me.

And as it happens, I just turned to the conclusion, not purposefully, but I opened it there, and here's what it said. Of all the temptations, writes Bunyan, that I ever met with in my life, to question the being of God and truth of his gospel is the worst, and the worst to be born when this temptation comes.

It takes away my girdle from me and removeth the foundation from under me. Oh, I have often thought of that word, Have your loins girt about with truth.

Of all the temptations that have come to me, he says, the worst, that I would doubt God and doubt his word. Oh, how we need to fasten on the belt of truth.

Now, just a prayer. Father, even as we study these things, the evil one attacks us.

[37 : 59] We thank you for the fact that although the message of the cross is foolishness to us by nature, that a Galilean carpenter hanging upon a Roman gibbet would have anything to say to us all these years later.

And certainly, the idea that there, outside the city walls of Jerusalem, took place the pivotal event of human history is absolute folly to the world.

But to those who believe, it's everything. Lord, forgive our unbelief. Help us to believe, to buckle up.

