

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Thanks for the warm welcome. Yeah, Daniel and I have a friendship that spans, I think, almost exactly 20 years now. Yeah, back to when I was 16. Now you know how old I am. This morning we're going to be looking at Ephesians chapter 6, verses 10 through 20, a passage that was read on the armor of God.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. It was said of Alexander the Great that he was more valuable on the battlefield than 10,000 men, that his coming could change the outcome of a battle because his courage, his courage, was the courage of his men. In one battle, his army was surrounded and outnumbered five to one, and still they took the victory. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. And in fact, in his 13-year reign, beginning at age 20, he never lost a single battle. And this was not for lack of battles. He took more ground single-handedly than anyone ever had before him, conquering the whole of the Persian Empire, including large parts of Africa, Asia, Asia, India, making his one of the largest kingdoms the world has ever known. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. To fight with Alexander, with him, under his authority, was real strength. It made all the difference in the world that he was your commander. It changed the way you fought. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

The Apostle Paul, here in Ephesians 6, writing to one of the earliest churches, a group of Jews and Greeks in Ephesus, is telling this group of Christians that by following Jesus, that by trusting in Jesus, they are entering into real battle. Be strong, he tells them. Put on armor, he tells them. Stand, wrestle, do battle, he says. But not physical battle. Of course, this is not a matter of flesh and blood, not of metal swords and fleshly wounds, but a spiritual battle against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness. And this morning, we're going to consider together the nature of this spiritual battle by asking and answering two questions. Where are we? And what are we to do? Where are we? We're in a spiritual battle. What are we to do? We're to get dressed for battle. So first, where are we? Again, according to Paul, whether you and I know it or not, whether we're aware of this or not, we together are in what he calls a spiritual battle.

[3 : 07] Now, I'd imagine that most of us here are in one of two camps in response to this. You know, maybe you're here and you're thinking, good, you know, this is an opportunity for us to finally consider the things that many of us don't tend to think about, the spiritual dimensions of life, right?

That we are in this spiritual battle, that we don't talk enough, maybe particularly in the Western world, right, about things spiritual. We tend to materialize everything. And we get so distracted by what happens in our bodies and with our families and in our workplaces and just in mundane day-to-day life.

That seems to be our great preoccupation here in the West. And we don't think enough about the spiritual forces. And it's actually the spiritual realm that really matters. We should think less about the material realm, more about the spiritual. Or maybe you're in the opposite camp. You respond in the opposite direction.

You hear these words of spiritual battle and you're not sure what to think about these words. You hear these words, spiritual battle, talk of miracles, maybe talk of demon possession, and all of this seems very strange to you. Because you tend to think that most of the world's problems are historical. They're economic. They're political, not spiritual. We don't want to spiritualize things. Our world's problems lie elsewhere, not in this spiritual darkness thing that Paul is going on about here. And what I hope becomes clear as we spend some time considering this text and the world that this text presumes, is that each of these approaches actually misses the mark. Whether by over-spiritualizing life in this world or by under-spiritualizing life in this world. Because Paul, and the whole of the scriptures with him, offers us a different approach. Again, not an over-spiritualizing, not an under-spiritualizing, but instead what you might call a radical spiritual materiality. Okay? Or what

you might call a radically material spirituality. Okay? That these things go together and must be kept together. That as humans, body, soul, spirit, everything that we do is spiritual. Okay? At least it's not spiritually neutral, everything that we do. In the same way that as physical beings, and I think we can all agree that as physical beings we can't do anything apart from the physicality of our own bodies. This is just the way that God has given us to engage with the world around us and with one another, is with the physicality of our own bodies. And so it is as spiritual beings who can't avoid our spirituality, we can't do anything apart from the spirituality of who we are. So as Paul says elsewhere, whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do this to the glory of God and as spiritual material beings. And we see this throughout

Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Before we ever get to this passage on spiritual forces of evil, that for Paul, the spiritual life does not consist in spiritual feelings. Okay? Paul says very little, if anything, about spiritual feelings or even a sense of the transcendence, which is how I think many in our day understand spirituality, right? When we feel certain things, when, you know, chords on a piano are played in the right way or when we're observing God's universe, which is beautiful, and we have these feelings of transcendence, and we think that's where spirituality lives, right? That's where we see spirituality at work, is in these feelings of the transcendence. And that, for Paul, would be a very reduced form of spirituality, right? Instead, for Paul, here's what spirituality looks like. Here's what the spiritual life looks like. Okay? If we just do a quick survey of the letter that's leading up to our chapter 6, the last chapter of this letter to the Ephesians. Spiritual transformation for Paul looks like reconciliation across racial and ethnic boundaries. It looks like those who, in the power of Christ, stop living how we used to live, he tells us. Those who lie, you're to stop being deceitful. Those who steal are to no longer steal. In your anger, do not sin, he says. Do not let the sun go down while you're still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. This gives us maybe an insight into what spiritual life, what spiritual forces look like, right? We could pause here. What does the spiritual battle look like for Paul? What does it look like to give the devil a foothold? Here's what it looks like. [7 : 37] It's when you and your friend, or you and your spouse, let the sun go down on your anger. You're in a fight, you're angry with each other, and you put off bringing this to a resolution. Here is where the devil is given a foothold. Spiritual battle in the midst of a basic relationship.

Paul then goes on to talk about relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters. And all of this, for Paul, is what it means to be engaged in spiritual battle. Parents, when you're impatient towards your kids, as I was this morning, when you neglect them for lesser things. This is not just a matter of material reality. There's a spiritual dimension to all of this. All of this, for Paul, is what it means to be engaged in spiritual battle in the midst of our family lives. Children or youth, when you don't respect and honor your parents. That, too, is a place where you children in here who are listening, where you are engaged in spiritual battle. When you're choosing and wrestling with whether or not you should listen to your parents and honor them, and engage with them, and listen to them, respect them. This is an opportunity for the devil to get a foothold in your life. There's something very serious going on in our disobedience, in our rebellion. Friends, when you're malicious or envious or just mean, gossipy in the way that you speak of those around you, behind their backs, be careful, Paul is saying. Be careful. These are spiritually destructive acts. They are destructive to you and to those that you speak of.

So as we engage our passage here in Ephesians 6, we need to recognize that at the end of Paul's letter here in chapter 6, he's not starting a new subject. Sometimes we can read chapter 6 on spiritual battle as something that's disconnected from the rest of Paul's letter. But that would be an unfaithful reading. He's not concluding his letter with something unrelated to everything he's just said. Quite the opposite. He concludes his letter by reframing everything that he's just said, but now from the perspective of the spiritual realm. Spiritual realm of darkness.

[9 : 54] So again, when he brings up wrestling against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, the question is, where does this all happen?

Where does this wrestling, this battle, where does this play out in our lives? And as Paul's already said, here's where it happens. It happens when you let the sun go down on your anger. Again, he's not talking about needing to cast out demons in the context of Ephesians. He's talking about human relationships when we allow sun to go down on our anger. You want to talk about demonic attacks, according to Paul. Well, here's one. It's when you're angry, and instead of being self-controlled in your anger, in your anger you choose to sin against the person with whom you're angry.

You're unwilling to reconcile, and the devil is given a place to stand. It could go on. When you steal, when you lie, when you deceive the person, you know, people around you. Okay, all of these things, Paul is saying, this is where the spiritual battle happens. And you say, but that doesn't sound demonic, right? I mean, this doesn't sound demonic. I thought demonic stuff was the stuff of dreams and evil spirits and unseen things. But again, that's not how Paul sees it. These forces are at work all the time in the most mundane of relationships, all around us in the ordinary stuff of life, in times of conflict, temptation to lust or to take, periods of compromise.

You can even think about, you know, another kind of obvious place in scripture where we see spiritual battle taking place. Think about Peter, when he responds to Jesus' own claim that he needs to go and die, right? What does Jesus say in response? Get behind me, Satan. Get behind me, Satan. Here's a spiritual battle at play. Somebody wanting his own way rather than the way of God to move forward.

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. The battle we find ourselves in is a spiritual battle. But it's a battle fought out here, here, in the ordinary stuff of life, right? It's fought every morning that you wake up in the things you choose to do and not to do, in the thoughts you choose to dwell on and not to dwell on, in the prayers you choose to pray or not to pray, the things you choose to read or not to read.

[12 : 33] It's fought in how you live with your spouse, in how you live with your parents, your children, your housemates. This life, it turns out, is the arena of the spiritual battle of which Paul speaks.

So where are we? Paul says we're in a spiritual battle and that this is our everyday situation. Now, what are we to do in response? If it's the case that we are in this spiritual battle in our day-to-day lives where spiritual forces of evil are at work all the time to destroy us, to tempt and to accuse us, which are kind of the characteristic features of what the devil is trying to do, right? You could think of even the story of Adam and Eve. He seeks to tempt them and once they follow into their temptations, what does he do? He then accuses them, right? The devil is constantly involved in this temptation and the work of temptation and accusation. What are we to do in response?

We are to get dressed for battle, we find. Verse 10 and 11. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. How, we might ask, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. We might ask at this point, what is this strange armor that we are to put on? Paul goes on to talk about the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the spirit. What's going on here? And how does somebody put on a breastplate of righteousness anyway? One common approach is that these armor pieces are all to be put on by faith. Okay, so for instance, we put on the belt of truth by believing God's truth. The breastplate of righteousness by believing in Jesus' righteousness and so on.

And in this perspective, the armor of God is all about believing and thinking rightly. Okay, knowing the right things and believing accordingly. And it's more a matter of thinking and believing than of what we might call spirit-empowered doing. Okay, understood this way, to fasten the belt of truth again, it's about, it's more about believing the right things. Okay, and less about living the Christian life in truth.

Okay, but what I'd argue is that what Paul is going on about here is that this armor that we're to put on, that this is all active, this is a matter of spirit-empowered obedience. Okay, that to put on the belt of truth is not simply about believing the right things, but about living in the truth. Okay, in truthfulness, *aletheia* is the Greek word, meaning truthfulness or sincerity, living in truthfulness.

[15 : 08] It's a wholehearted commitment to love and to obey God. Put this on, Paul says. Do this. Commit yourself to living the Christian life in truth, and you will be protected. Okay, that Christian living and Christian obedience, when we do the things that we ought to do, that this is protection for us. It is spiritual armor.

Putting on the breastplate of righteousness is likewise not about putting on Christ's righteousness by faith, although that is to be done, as Paul says elsewhere. But here, what's in view is to put on the breastplate of righteousness is a call to live righteously, right, to live in righteousness, to be clothed in good deeds and in righteous acts. If you want to know how to be protected against the wiles of the enemy, one of the ways that Paul is giving us for armor is to obey God, okay, to obey God, to live righteously, to do the things that we know we ought to do, to not be immoral, you know,

sleeping around or whatever it is, engaging in lust, okay, whatever temptations that face you. Because as we do these things, what we find is that the enemy runs with this. He runs with this. He seeks to tempt us and then accuse us and destroy us. And the call is then to walk in obedience, right? Don't let resentments fester in your relationships, and don't let sin and lust linger.

Do everything you can to get these things out of your life in order that you might be protected spiritually. Wear this armor. Because in every act of disobedience, what Paul is saying is we open up our lives to spiritual destruction every day. Stop it, he says. Stop it. Put on this armor. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Again, this is real armor in the real world, and it will protect us from a world of hurt and of darkness. I had a nice conversation last night with my grandmother who's here, great-grandmother to my kids, of course. And she was bringing up how challenging it is for people oftentimes to offer forgiveness to others, right? This is like a basic call of Christian living, right? But the way that when we choose to not offer forgiveness, what that does to us, right? That we become encumbered. This opens up, again, a world of opportunity for the devil to have at us, right? To cause us to be bitter and resentful towards others. My grandma was commenting on how it shows on people's faces when they're unwilling to forgive, right? This is spiritual protection.

This is spiritual armor, living the Christian life, walking in obedience. This is the way that Paul gives us to find ourselves protected and well-armored in this spiritual battle. We don't have time to cover all of these in depth, but Paul goes on to speak of the readiness given by the gospel of peace as shoes for our feet. He speaks of the shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And in all of these things, he calls us to take up a particular dimension of Christian faith and obedience. Okay, take these things up, put them on. They will be armor for your souls. Now, I would guess in a room this size, from all the different walks that we come from, that there are some of you here who have been Christians for years. And in this particular season of life, of your Christian faith, perhaps you feel stuck. Stuck in complacency, or in repetitive patterns of sin, or in doubt. And let me ask you this morning, in response to these struggles and you feeling stuck, are you putting on the armor of God? Or are you leaving yourself unprotected to the wiles of the enemy?

[18:48] Today, have you set out to live the Christian life in truthfulness and in sincerity? Are you guarding yourself with righteous living? Or are you letting some sins go? Giving in? Not living the righteous life? Not doing what you ought to do? Not cutting sin off at the root? Are you putting on the shoes of the gospel of peace? I mean, how often, just by neglecting to do the things that we ought to do, do we find ourselves like King David, who didn't go to battle, finding ourselves in periods of temptation?

Are you putting these shoes on to be ministers of the gospel of peace where the Lord has you? Are you arming yourself with faith and the truths of salvation, the sword of the spirit, in response to the lies of the flesh, the world, and the devil? Are you doing these things? Because if not, you've been living a long time, perhaps, unprotected in a real battle.

Well, we find here that the devil is not messing around. That's clear throughout the scriptures, and that we can't afford to either. If you're not diligent, he'll do everything he can to tear your life apart. And maybe he's already on his way to doing that. Put on the armor of God, Paul says.

But it's important that we ask, before we end our time, who can do this? Who can put on the armor of God in this way? Can you, sitting here? How is it going for you in putting on the armor of God, putting on truthfulness and righteousness and faith, being a messenger of gospel peace, wielding the sword of the spirit? If I'm honest, I can find ways that I failed in every one of these areas, and that I continue to fail. Who can do this? Who can be so diligent in putting on this armor?

Believe it or not, the prophet Isaiah actually was asking this very same question 700 years before Jesus ever arrived on scene. Who of God's people can put this armor on? Who can do this? Isaiah was asking. Here's what he says in Isaiah 59. The Lord saw that there was no man righteous, and wondered that there was no one to intercede. See, after all God's faithfulness in this context, you know, God had given Israel a king, a land, prosperity, all that they needed. And the Lord looks down on his people at this point and says, they've all turned away. They've all gone their own way. They've all failed to live the righteous life before me. Every single one of them has failed.

[21:21] None of God's people, not even Isaiah, the prophet, was righteous, apparently, before God. And so what does the Lord do? As the verse continues, it says, then his own arm brought Israel salvation.

Here is God's response to the fact that no one was righteous in Israel. Here's the Lord's response according to Isaiah the prophet. Then his own arm brought Israel salvation. He, the Lord, put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. You can ask, what's going on here? The prophet Isaiah is saying that where Israel fails to put on the breastplate of righteousness, to bring righteousness into the land, where Israel fails to put on the helmet of salvation, of God's rest and peace, we find this promise that the Lord himself, God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, will come down to put it on himself. It's quite a promise. He goes on to say, and the Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression. And this is the good news of the gospel for you and for me this morning. Proclaimed 700 years before Jesus arrived on the scene that there is a Redeemer who came to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, and his name is Jesus, the Christ. And while you and I and all of Israel failed to be truthful, to put on the belt of truth, we find that there's one who came and lived only ever and always in the truth, even in the face of all liars, in the face of unjust power. There's one who came and lived a truthful life, full of aletheia, sincerity. And while we failed to be messengers of peace and put on these gospel shoes, he fitted himself with the shoes of the gospel to proclaim peace to those who are near and to those who are far off, we find that the Lord, Jesus, is the one who put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head.

And the good news for all who are near and for all who are far away, the good news for all who are ensnared by the devil and for all weary Christians who try and fail and try again to put on this armor of God and fail again, we find that the good news is that Jesus has armed himself for us, that we have a savior who has armed himself for us so that in all of our efforts and all of our failures, the final words to us and to you this morning is grace. The final word is grace.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. As I said at the beginning, to fight with Alexander the Great, with him, under his authority, was real strength. It made all the difference in the world that he was your commander. It changed the way you fought. And in Jesus Christ, we have a Lord and a Savior who not only fights with us and for us, but binds himself to us in faith so that we can say with all the confidence in the world that his victory is our victory. His victory over sin and death and the devil, that's our victory. His life is our life. His obedience is our obedience. His death is our death.

His resurrection, our resurrection. His eternal life is our eternal life. And his armor is our armor. By faith, all is ours. And now, in light of this, in light of this good news that he's done everything for us, given us the victory for us, in light of this, we're called to take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand. Would you pray with me?

[25 : 19] Our Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus, and we thank you for these words from the Apostle Paul to this early Christian community. These words that call us to do something very real, take up real armor in the spiritual life. We ask, Father, that you would give us grace. We ask that you would also help us to know deeply that in Christ, all has been done. The battles have been fought. All has been done.

That our victory is secure in him, and help us to be a people who respond to this good news of grace by taking up armor, and by fighting against the devil, the flesh, and the world. We ask all of this in Jesus' name, for his glory. Amen.