

Putting On

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[0 : 00] I want to give you a quick heads-up in the beginning here. Dan Gifford said it's the 8 o'clock service, so go ahead and preach a bit longer. But I won't preach the kind of length of sermon I preached the first ever time I preached in a church, which was an hour and 45 minutes.

Promise that that won't happen. My name is Dan Glover, and I work as Ecclesia John's, mostly with Ecclesia, the college and career age ministry.

And I want to welcome you here on this first Sunday of Advent. We're taking a break for about five weeks now from our Matthew sermon series.

And we're going to be looking at the collects that we pray through the season of Advent. And we're going to be holding those up next to various passages from Scripture. This morning we're going to be considering that Advent is both a looking backward to the first coming of the Messiah in humility, as we just prayed, as well as a looking forward to his future return in glory.

So today, from Ephesians 6, we want to look at the vocation of the church that is situated between these two aspects of Advent.

[1 : 25] Christ's first Advent that we commemorate, and his second Advent that we anticipate. The collect that we prayed and the passage we just read both contain some language that is a little bit jolting for us, in a sense, if we stop and think about it.

It contains some martial imagery, some military language, which is not what we're used to, maybe, when we think of Advent. I know I think of like a sort of an exciting time.

The kids around the house are all excited for Christmas. Advent is like the waiting time for presents, maybe. But this passage this morning from Ephesians 6 is a far cry from that kind of sentimentality. It's not so much Bing Crosby crooning about White Christmas as it is a bugle blast rallying the troops. So what is this all about?

Well, Ephesians 6, 10 to 20, picks up a theme that's been running through the letter. The theme of the cosmic conflict between darkness and light.

[2 : 37] Between spiritual forces of evil and Jesus Christ and the light he brings. The conflict in the time between Christ's first and second coming.

As we look at this passage together this morning, I want to ask five questions of it. What, who, why, how, and when. So our first question is, just what is this passage calling us to?

What are we called to in this passage? There are two parallel exhortations here. The first exhortation being, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

This has a passive sense to it. It probably should be read more like, be strengthened in the Lord or receive the strength of the Lord.

In Ephesians 2, Paul said that salvation is by grace through faith. It's not of ourselves. It is not by works. It's not by our effort.

[3 : 43] So we shouldn't be surprised that neither is being strengthened in the Lord by our effort. It's a gift that God gives to his people. This fits with Paul's prayer in 3.16.

That according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened. He may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being. The second exhortation is to stand against the schemes of the devil.

In this passage, you notice we're called four times to stand. In verse 11, stand. In verse 13, withstand and stand firm.

And in verse 14, stand therefore. This is not a call, however, in light of what we just finished talking about.

This is not a call to stoic resistance. It's not that Jesus' death and resurrection won the decisive battle, and that was by grace, and now it's up to us to finish things off.

[4 : 50] Here we're being called to participate in God's victory through Christ over darkness. John Stott notes that when Paul urges us to draw upon the power, might, and strength of the Lord Jesus in verse 10, he uses exactly the three same words that he used in chapter 1, verse 19 and 20, in relation to God's work of raising Jesus from the dead.

God's might was displayed in Christ's resurrection and exaltation. And we are called to stand in the strength of Christ's own resurrection life. So we might answer the first question, what does this passage call us to?

By summing up these two exhortations together, we are called to stand strong in the Lord. The second question, against whom do we stand in Christ's strength?

In other words, who is the enemy that we are wrestling with? First of all, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. This simply means our battle is not with people, not with humans.

In the New Testament, when flesh and blood are used, it means human people, right? Think in Matthew, when Peter has his famous confession of Jesus as the son of the living God.

[6 : 25] And Jesus says, blessed are you, Peter, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you. It was revealed by the Father. In other words, it was not through human wisdom that Peter just figured that out.

So flesh and blood is not who we wrestle against. In verse 12, we see we wrestle against, and there's a bunch of terms here, the principalities or the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers over this present darkness, spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our battle is against cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil. Now, many people say that these are merely corrupt human institutions, maybe oppressive traditions or unjust power structures, and certainly these things can be co-opted and used for much evil.

But it's actually talking about spiritual, personal spiritual forces, demonic forces here. He actually mentions the devil in verse 11.

Christians have been rescued from these evil spiritual powers and authorities, but these powers and authorities are not satisfied to watch people, as Colossians say, being transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son.

[7 : 57] Ephesians 5, 8-14 reminds us that we were at one time children of darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. And therefore, we are to walk as children of light, not to take part in fruitless deeds of darkness, but instead we're to shine light upon those deeds and expose them, just as Christ has shone upon us.

That passage says the resurrected Christ is the light. So, we stand in Christ, who is the light, against the spiritual powers of darkness.

We'll look in a little bit at how we do that. But before that, why do we stand? Why are we called to stand in Christ's strength against these spiritual forces of evil?

Paul tells us, because of the schemes of the devil, he wants us to be aware of the schemes of the devil. The spiritual forces of evil wrestle to regain ground and to enslave people in darkness once again.

The schemes of the devil are strategies which tempt the church to compromise its holiness and therefore shake its faith.

[9 : 19] In chapter 6, verses 18-20, where Paul says, please pray for me that I might be bold, he says twice, that I might be bold to declare the gospel, we see that if the church's Christ-likeness or holiness is compromised, our gospel witness is disrupted.

It's undermined. And in Ephesians 4, Paul gives us a couple examples of what these schemes, what these wiles of the devil might be.

In the church, Paul says, it might be speaking untruthfully to each other. It might be allowing anger to cause divisiveness amongst the body. These things erode our trust internally and they destroy our witness externally.

So, Ephesians and Colossians, the parallel letter, are all about the triumph, though, that God has already had over the powers of darkness. So, why do we need to be warned against the wiles of the devil?

Well, here. If Christ has disarmed them in his death and resurrection, how are these powers still a threat to us?

[10 : 37] Well, they're not ultimately deadly to those who avail themselves of what Paul is calling us to here, the strength of Christ himself.

But, the warning is precisely that we not make peace with the principalities and powers of evil. Or, that we fear them and try to run from this conflict.

If we do either of those things, make peace with them, or fear them and run from them, they are still a threat to us. And this is why we need to stand against their schemes.

So, fourthly, how do we stand in Christ's strength? We're called to stand in Christ's strength. How do we do this? This is where the armor of God comes in.

In Ephesians 6, the full armor of God. And in our collect, the armor of light. The command is given twice, once in verse 11 and once in verse 13, to take up the whole armor of God.

[11 : 43] The point is that we're called to arm ourselves in God's strength for the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ against the attacks of these spiritual forces of evil.

Since our enemy is not flesh and blood, human weapons will not work. We must fight the spiritual forces of darkness with the spiritual weapons that God supplies us.

Now, I'm with John Calvin here, which is usually a good place to be. He doesn't see this as being some kind of exhaustive list.

There are other lists, like in Colossians, much shorter of God's armor. But it's to indicate the type of weapons according to the themes that Paul's been dealing with in Ephesians.

So let's look at those weapons quickly here. We're called to put on the belt of truth. Now, if you look back at Ephesians 4.25, you see that one of the threats to the church is when Christians do not speak truthfully to each other.

[12 : 52] I think here this means just being truthful and having integrity with each other rather than the truth of God's word or the truth of the gospel because those are both addressed in other pieces of armor.

And the breastplate of righteousness simply means faithful obedience to Christ. You have the shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace.

Paul's drawing on a theme from the great prophet of Advent, Isaiah, where Isaiah says, how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of them who preach good news, who preach the gospel of peace.

Then comes the shield of faith, which is given to us to extinguish all the flaming darts of the enemy. This isn't a little shield.

This was the, if you, I know in our kids' history books with the picture of the Roman soldiers, the great big tall shields that were double wood and then wrapped in linen and then in hides and soaked in water.

[14 : 04] I imagine they were really heavy to carry into battle. But it was like a little wall that went in front of you. And when flaming arrows hit it, they would sizzle their way out.

And this is faith. This is what faith does. Then comes the helmet of salvation. Ephesians primarily is talking about salvation being accomplished.

And in Colossians, the helmet is of the hope of salvation. That's a beautiful picture of Advent. The already of salvation and the not yet, the still hoped for.

And then is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And many commentators note that God's word is the only offensive weapon in this list. Jesus himself, in Matthew 4 and in Luke 4, in his temptations in the wilderness, shows us how this weapon is used.

When Satan throws warped quotes from Scripture at Jesus to tempt him to abandon God's mission of salvation in the way God wants Jesus to do it, Jesus answers him back with Scripture.

[15 : 25] He refutes Satan's lies with the truths of Scripture. And lastly, many commentators say, then Paul drops the weapon metaphor and speaks about prayer.

I think he's staying with the weapon metaphor because I imagine any soldier going into battle against enemies like this would be praying like crazy. That would be a pretty major weapon, I would think.

And this prayer is for the successful spread of the gospel message. For Paul's boldness and effectiveness in preaching the gospel. So Scripture is not the only offensive weapon.

I think prayer and supplication is a fierce weapon because it calls directly upon God to act for his people as they bring the gospel to a dark world and as they are opposed in their mission to do this. It's important to note, though, that the armor of God is not something God merely provides for us as though he's our arms dealer, our spiritual arms dealer.

[16:36] It's something that God himself puts on. And this is the language Paul is using. He's borrowing language again from Isaiah. In Isaiah 59, verse 17, Yahweh is described as putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation.

And this comes right before the beautiful passage about the Messiah, the servant of the Lord, coming in light. In Isaiah 60, verses 1 to 3, Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.

This is a description of the Messiah coming in light. So Yahweh puts on armor, but so does his servant, the Messiah.

Isaiah uses many names for the promised Messiah, one of them being the shoot from the stump of Jesse in Isaiah 11. It's that famous passage in Isaiah that refers to the reconciling and redeeming work of the Messiah who was to come.

[17:59] Redeeming the fallen creation, bringing divine peace. You remember the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the baby goat, the lion and the calf, dwelling together in peace and a little child shall lead them.

In that passage, it says that the Messiah, the shoot from Jesse, that righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness the belt of his loins. So getting back to Ephesians, in chapter 5, verse 1, we're called to be imitators of God.

Our fight against spiritual powers of darkness is a major way we imitate God. See, God doesn't just give us armor.

He shares his own armor with us as we participate in Christ's triumph over the demonic forces of darkness. Finally, fifth, when do we stand in Christ's strength?

It's an odd question. When are we called to stand in Christ's strength? Verse 13 tells us to take up God's armor so that we can stand in the evil day.

[19:15] What does this mean? This is the present age between the dawning of the light of Christ and the bright light of noon which will shine at Christ's return when he comes in the fullness of his kingdom.

In this present evil age, the powers of darkness are doing all they can to thwart the gospel and to trip up the church. Look at the descriptors in this passage for when we are to put on God's armor. Readiness, alertness, all perseverance at all times, in all circumstances. We're to put on and employ the full armor of God at all times and in all circumstances.

As we wrap up, in the pilgrim's progress, and a bunch of commentators point this out and I had forgotten this, John Bunyan famously observes that there's no armor for Christians' back when he receives armor to go and face the giant, Apollyon.

I think it's Apollyon. He has no armor for his back and neither do we in Ephesians here. And that's because Christians are supposed to stand firm in this fight.

[20:37] The fiery darts of the enemy are supposed to hit us in the shield of faith as we stand firm, not in the small of our backs as we run away. We may only take off this armor once our battle with the evil forces of darkness, the demonic powers, is finished when Christ returns.

It is Christ's return that we're looking for. That's the anticipation part of Advent. There's a tension in Ephesians between the salvation God has already accomplished in Christ and the ongoing conflict between God and Satan in this present evil age.

And we feel this tension in the collect that we read, that we prayed together. God's Son, Jesus Christ, came to visit us in great humility in his first Advent, his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation.

Christ defeated the spiritual forces of darkness, the principalities and powers, the rulers and authorities. He put them to open shame, Colossians tells us. And for those who place their faith in Christ, we share in this victory.

we're no longer oppressed by the forces of darkness. Our lives are now hidden with Christ in God. But between that victory at Christ's first Advent and his coming again in glory to bring in the fullness of his kingdom, we are called to stand against the spiritual forces of evil that want to keep the world in darkness and want to keep people estranged from God, the God who came and made himself known in Christ.

[22 : 33] I don't know how many of you read Archbishop Foley Beach's Advent letter. I read it yesterday and it got me thinking. I think that in places of relative comfort and stability, stability, we tend to focus on the remembrance aspect of Advent, that Jesus won the victory over the powers.

And I think maybe this thought prompted by Archbishop Beach's letter, in places where Christians are suffering persecution for their faith, I think they may maybe tend more to look toward the urgent hope for the return of Jesus, where he will put all things right.

The spiritual darkness in the world, even in relatively stable, comfortable parts of the world, sometimes seems overwhelming. But we must remain alert in prayerful solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters around the world.

And we must remember, we must take heart that Jesus has overcome the darkness. We have a resurrection hope in which we stand, grounded in the power of Christ's own resurrection.

That's why this armor works. So we pray for God's peace this Advent. We pray for grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light to stand firm against the powers of darkness.

[24 : 15] And we stand firm praying at all times in the spirit that great Advent prayer, come Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.