

The Whole Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-20

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Today we finish receiving the summer gift of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We've stepped through the letter in highlight fashion, and just to refresh our memory, the journey has gone like this. Remember it's a letter to y'all, as we read in the Greek, or as I learned to say on the Tennessee mission trip, "you'uns." An even more precise word for the second person plural – spectacular! It's a letter to the community as a whole. I want you'uns to know the incomprehensible love God has for you, and live in this kind of love, united in Christ as one body. Each of you has been given gifts to share the gospel, you are a unique part of the living body of Christ on earth, and God needs you. God needs the best you, so put away the things that turn you away from God, and be imitators of God, with Christ as your guide. Live as children of light, says Paul, and be filled with the Spirit of God. Ephesians is one of the greatest sermons ever written. And today we read the climactic finale.

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NRSV)

10Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For 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. 13Therefore 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. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18Pray 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.

19Pray 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, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Paul says be strong in the Lord 'cuz there's a struggle goin' on. There is an adversary out there, the text here uses the Greek word DIABOLOS. Our translation uses the word "devil," but that brings to many wrong-founded pictures to your head, so don't use it. This is The Adversary.¹ Not a personified evildoer in a cape with a pitchfork, but a COSMIC adversary, one you can't see, a force in the spiritual realm that causes darkness and evil to spill from the heavenly places into the world, generating the misuse of power and free will in this present darkness. Paul explicitly says, stop pretending your enemies are people, for our struggle is far greater than that, it is against spiritual forces of brokenness that wield darkness in this world.

The "present darkness" for the Ephesian churches was marginalization from the outside and discord on the inside. But darkness is our link to these ancient people, we know darkness, it is everywhere and all around. Injustice – people hungry and homeless and kicked down by life, people abandoned, or pushed to the margins, people terrified. Unrest is our present darkness, unrest BETWEEN people who are warring and battling and jockeying, and unrest WITHIN people who are lonely, depressed, sick, scarred, traumatized, and feel abandoned by God. Darkness is quite... present.

The present darkness is caused by the adversary, the diabolos, a cosmic power that has power over weakness. The spiritual forces of the adversary include fear, selfishness, despair, and hopelessness. These forces have power over us in our weakness, and cause the spread of our present darkness. It is a vice grip, the adversary causes darkness, and darkness causes our weakness, and weakness succumbs to the adversary all

over again. Be strong in the Lord, for our struggle is against the cosmic powers of THIS spreading, spiraling, and very present darkness.

Be strong in the Lord, put on the armor of God. Receive the belt of truth around your waist, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of gospel proclamation, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.

The armor of God has quite a history, it turns out. In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, God is often portrayed as a warrior, battling against adversary gods and nations for the people of Israel. Nowhere is this imagery more vivid than in Isaiah 59. Here in the Book of Isaiah, the Lord is displeased because justice is nowhere to be found, and there's no one to do anything about it, so God brought victory by his own arm, by his own righteousness. The Lord, says the text, "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" (Isaiah 59:17).

Notice what Paul is doing with Isaiah 59 here, re-appropriating Hebrew prophetic language about God the armored warrior, and telling us the church to receive God's armor. Paul makes a claim about Christ throughout Ephesians, that Christ places God's armor before us, models it and empowers us to put it on if we just believe. If we follow Christ we can be imitators of God, wear God's victorious armor, and live into the image of Christ that God sees in us.²

Paul re-appropriates this ancient Hebrew language about God's battle armor, and adds to it a belt, shoes, a shield, and a sword. Our protections include what God wears in Isaiah, righteousness and salvation, and others – truth, proclamation of the gospel, faith, and the Word of God. The whole armor of God is what you put on when you follow Christ. We strap on a belt together every week when we receive and respond to God's Word together in worship. We grab a shield every time we gather for Bible study and spiritual exploration, striving to receive the complicated truth about God revealed in the Bible, and grow in our faith. We put on shoes every time we go forth from this place and live with God's kind of self-giving love on your sleeve, whether it's at home, at the grocery store, at the office, or in Rogers Park at Good News Partners, or serving meals at the Community Kitchen, or at the bedside of a sick or lonely person, or maybe you'll go on the mission trip with Wilmette to New Orleans. We are protected from the adversary's powers of fear, selfishness, and despair, if we follow Christ in these myriad ways and put on this armor of God.

You'll notice that in the vivid imagery of an armored warrior, there is only one weapon we are to wield. Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The Word of God, proclaimed in scripture and experienced in the world, is the weapon we have against The Adversary. Sharing God's kind of self-giving love with others is the way that the powers of fear, selfishness, and despair are rendered weak, and the way that the darkness in the world begins to lift.

A woman named Clara had been putting on her armor in a Philadelphia church for years, studying and serving with her son. One day, her only child was shot and killed by a 14-year-old boy trying to impress his gang. Her world was seemingly taken away, senselessly and tragically, and she attended the assailant Jerry's trial every day, sitting impassively. When the young Jerry was convicted of the killing, before guards took him away, Clara slowly rose from her seat, and impaled him with her glare, saying, "I'm going to END you." The youth was taken away to juvenile prison.

After a few months, Clara went to visit Jerry in prison. He was living on the streets before his term, and thus had no visitors until Clara came by. She sat before him, awkwardly, and slowly they began to talk, and she left him some money for candy. She came back again, bringing food and small gifts to Jerry, and eventually she was there regularly. Near the end of his three-year sentence, Clara asked Jerry what he would be doing when he got out. He remembered her glare at trial, and got nervous at the question, confused and uncertain. She offered to set him up with a job at a friend's company, and then asked where he would live.

He of course had no family to return to, so she offered him temporary residence in her now-spare room. He lived there and ate there and worked for eight months, and then one day Clara called him into the living room for a chat. For all her generosity, she always made him nervous, but he sat down opposite her.

Then she started, "Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to END you?" "Um, I sure do," he replied. "I'll never forget that moment." "Well, I did it," she went on. "I did not want whatever killed my boy for no reason to remain alive on this earth." That's why I've given my life to you, given my love to you, that's how I set about changing whatever had ruined my past life.³ Clara later adopted Jerry, she became a mother to him, and he became a son to her. Now both warriors armored against The Adversary, and armed with a proclamation of the incomprehensible and transformative and world-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul ends the text with a plea, pray for me, so that when I speak, I may make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Fellow ambassadors in chains, this day we pray for understanding, our protection, and boldness with the gospel, our sword by which our present darkness will be slain.

¹ "Devil," New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1, 2009.

² "Armor of God," New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1, 2009.

³ From Bart Campolo's blog on Sojourners, <http://blog.sojo.net/2009/04/15/a-good-story-im-going-to-kill-you/>.