

A LITTLE WAR – A LITTLE ARMOR

The setting, imagery, and message of this passage in Ephesians does suggest that we are in a battle – that if we understand the situation, we will see ourselves as spiritual warriors. If this is what we really think, we will get far more serious about staying in training and staying alert to what we are up against – and most of all, we will be far more aware of how essential it is for us to stay in constant contact and communication with our Commander.

Let us say at the outset that it is difficult and important to keep the warrior images from blurring back into W-W (way of the world) levels: back into concepts of hurting or killing people – attempts to “take out” the enemies. None of you may have trouble with that, but it has been trouble over and over in our history. Singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” or even “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” does get the wrong juices flowing for some of us all of the time, and for the rest of us some of the time. And as implied in the paragraph above, Satan loves to piggyback on any useful motive or emotion he can twist to his own purposes – including our allegiance to Jesus.

On the heels of that reminder, and before we begin this discussion, we should also remember Romans 8:37: “*Overwhelming victory is ours through him who loves us.*” We need to remember that. We are not alone in this battle – not ever.

Okay, we begin. It is silly, or at least irrelevant, to be walking around dressed in armor if there is no battle. For the most part, main-line Christians do not believe there is a real and serious “spiritual battle” going on. They know there are lots of problems in this world. They may favor a political candidate, or give money to some cause or organization they “believe in.” But they are talking about a temporal, earthly, physical battle, not a spiritual battle. Spiritual warfare – and being spiritual warriors – seems like a sort-of Disneyland aberration to them. There is no real and powerful Adversary, in their view. Life has its challenges, of course, but those are real and obvious things like poverty, ecology, injustice, and racial or religious prejudices. None of these things, in their opinion, have connections to real or deadly spiritual dimensions beyond or behind what is being manifested in the physical realities. They may write articles or even books about “The Principalities and Powers,” but

it usually turns out to be just another essay about their favorite social cause or their favorite social grievance.

I think it's fair to say that they consider me and Paul – and at least many of the reports we have about Jesus – to be archaic, overdramatic, perhaps imaginative in sort of a science-fiction way. At best they think we are talking about some low form of metaphor. More often they think we are into some kind of fantasy that misleads and distracts the gullible. Naturally, my opinion of their blindness is not much better than their opinion of my delusions.

It seems unmistakable to me that the New Testament perspectives – including the thought-form and convictions of both Jesus and Paul – tell us of a spiritual warfare going on all around us that is both fierce and deadly serious. Moreover, this warfare is going on in realms beyond us. Angels are fighting on both sides – meaning, some of them are fallen angels. Cosmic powers are fighting on both sides. Paul is grateful to Jesus for unmasking these powers, and this warfare. And Paul thinks we better take this warfare far more seriously than most humans have (up to now), or we will have no chance to play our part, or even to be on the right side in this fight.

If you were not “asleep,” you already heard all this in the Scripture reading a few minutes ago. Paul is saying that this is the very reason it is so important for us to put on the armor God provides for us. But I won't ask if you “heard” it. I will just read the twelfth verse over again.

“For 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand”

In any case, if there really is a battle going on – true spiritual warfare and a highly effective Adversary – but also a true and incredibly powerful Savior calling us to join Him in the fray – then walking around without armor is somewhere between suicidal and just plain stupid. That is, it is inexcusably careless and irresponsible to be walking around in any kind of war zone without any protection.

Now, of course, if we really were in a war zone – if there really was a spiritual battle going on – wouldn't there be a huge number of people

walking around wounded and crippled, some of them putting other people to enormous expense and trouble trying to take care of them, because they hadn't bothered to go into training or do anything to protect themselves? Bingo! That is exactly what I see, everywhere I look. Where are you looking? And what are you seeing?

I am not referring to the walking wounded who have been hurt because they have faithfully engaged in the battle – hurt but healing because of the very warfare we are talking about. These are some of Christ's best soldiers.

But there are others who have been decimated because they would not listen to any truth beyond themselves; they would not take any precautions; they have never fought, yet have been slaughtered because they think it's all just a matter of bad breaks – bad luck, injustice, somebody was unfair – and it's always somebody else's fault. But they will not admit that there is any warfare going on that they can see or understand. And if they do start to heal, it's only a matter of time before they get hit again, because they still will not be wearing any protection. And most certainly they will not be trying to help in the battle.

They say things like: “What happened?” “I didn't do anything wrong.” “Why me?” “This isn't fair!” “Life shouldn't be this hard.” “What did I ever do to deserve this?” And they are completely oblivious to the possibility that there are some very good answers to most of these questions.

If a boxer gets decked in a fight and asks his trainer later, “What did I do wrong?” – perhaps the trainer will say to him, “You got careless in the fourth round and let your guard down. Either that or you were just too tired to keep your guard up.” Well, that information might not be pleasant to hear. It might even suggest that this fighter needs to get into even better condition before the next bout or he's very likely to lose the next fight as well. But at least there is some clarity – some rhyme and reason to what happened. It was not a total accident or an incomprehensible mystery. There really is mystery in our world. There are lots of things we do not fully understand. But if you walk around without armor, never train, never pay any attention to the methods or intentions of your Adversary – and you keep getting “killed,” “depressed,” “discouraged,” “sidetracked,” “taken out” – that is no mystery. Those are the inevitable consequences of the choices being made. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

So now I invite you to follow me through a very brief inventory of the armor Paul is telling us about. This passage is worthy of a seven-sermon series, and maybe we will get to that sometime. Somebody once said to me, “Seven? There are only six items of armor listed here.” To which I of course replied, “Hey, this is the Bible. If you end up with six, you know you’re missing something. In this case, most people miss the most important thing of all.”

Anyway, this is not a seven-sermon series. This is just a fast inventory and a few hints, in the hope that each of you will think and pray about “the whole armor of God” for yourselves. And while you are thinking and praying about it, maybe you will even decide to put it on.

Here is the inventory:

Around our waist – THE BELT OF TRUTH.

The belt encircles us, so this impacts every area of our lives. All relationship is based on trust. If we do not tell each other the truth, there is no trust. Being truthful is necessary to our WAY of Life, no matter where we go or which way we turn. It is also where we begin: the first step – the first piece of armor we put on. All of our dealings must be “in truth.” And please, this in no way implies that we are right or correct in all of our views, or that we have all the knowledge or information that we need. On our level, this truth means we do not intentionally mislead each other. We say what we mean, or keep quiet. When we are wrong, we get to learn and grow. But we do not lie or mislead people on purpose. This does not suggest that we are never playful, that we never tease each other, that we are always somber and serious. But we do not allow people to go away with misimpressions of who we are, where we are coming from, or what we care about – if we can help it. If we promise something, we keep our promises. If we declare caring or affection, we mean it. We don’t look for loopholes or fancy excuses for worming out of what we have declared. Over time, we hope this will allow others to trust us to mean what we say. *“Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay,”* Someone once said, in the Sermon on the Mount.

Strangely, one of the least honest places in our society is the Christian church. I believe it is one of the reasons the church has been losing its influence with many people of integrity in our time. The dishonesty in the church is, of course, for soft and lovely reasons. Is that not what we expect from Satan’s tricks? People say things they don’t

really mean or believe, but they think they are supposed to believe them, or others need to hear them, or it will be “good for the fellowship” to go along with certain expected views. Beyond that, sometimes people in the church exaggerate, or touch up their experiences, or tell what they consider to be impressive stories – because it will be good for somebody else’s faith. It is not. In the long run, it always does more damage than good. We are constantly losing credence, and losing some very gifted would-be followers, because they realize that church people cannot be trusted to tell the truth – even about what the Christian Path is really like or really all about.

Everything in true Christendom is based on relationships, and relationships are based on trust – and trust begins when we start telling each other the truth. So we must stop all the playacting, pretending, and speaking more for the effect than for honest sharing.

As most of you know, Mariana and I get to go to New Zealand soon. You will doubtless hear many good things while I am gone. But you do have some break time – at least some relief from me. Perhaps you will use some of that time to work on the armor that God in Christ Jesus offers us. First of all, we each need to reassess how well we are girded with THE BELT OF TRUTH.

Next, we cover our breast – our hearts – with THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Most of the armor is for our protection. I hope you noticed that. We are given only one weapon, and we will come to that in a minute. A lot of the spiritual warfare is about being able to withstand or endure (Paul’s imagery is powerful) all the crap being thrown at us to take us out of the fight. Righteousness protects our hearts. At least that’s what Paul thinks. Do we want to get this all inside out and backward? That’s easy! All we have to do is hear this the way most of our culture and its churches teach it and understand it.

At worst, but still familiar, we protect our hearts with self-righteousness. We think we are good, right, upstanding, moral giants – at least in comparison to most of those around us. We protect our hearts with the pretense of how good we are. But enough of that. Most of us have tried being self-righteous often enough along the way to know it does not work. At first glance it seems like it might be good protection. For a little while it can even feel like it’s making us safer. But it is totally useless in any

kind of real battle. Self-righteousness is a breastplate as soft as warm butter. It turns away no weapons of any kind – except in our imagination.

More widespread, and far more devastating, we put on the breastplate of good deeds. True righteousness is us doing good deeds, right? Ask almost anybody in our culture, Christian or otherwise, and they will confirm. We can protect our hearts from all the barbs, spears, and arrows being thrown at us: all the charges and accusations that we are selfish, stingy, uncaring, lacking compassion, unconcerned about all the real problems in our world – from dying birds, to starving people, to those suffering injustice of endless kinds. The answer to such accusations is obvious. We must prove our “righteousness” by doing good deeds: giving money to worthy causes; helping anybody we run across who has “needs.”

Have you ever made a list of the “worthy causes” and “worthy organizations” that are asking for your help or money or support? How many of them, in one way or another, try to get your support by using guilt? And who is the Master of Guilt? Satan, or Christ? Never mind.

The point is: If we do not get our heads on straight about “righteousness,” we will be putting on the wrong armor – and doing more harm than good. What if your breastplate of good deeds turns away five out of seven of the spears, arrows, swords, and axes being thrown at you? The answer is: You’re still dead. The breastplate cannot protect your heart if it cannot turn away the barbs of guilt. The breastplate of righteousness is very different in Paul’s view than what most people think, even in the church. So we have a big task here for our prayers and our meditation. I will only provide a few hints. Repeat: These are not answers; they are hints. However, they are hints from the same man, and the same mind, telling us about this armor in the first place!

“For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’” [You are going to give to all the worthy causes, help all the people in need?] *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’*” [If you want a breastplate to protect your heart, you better shift to a relationship with God, and not rely on your good deeds. I know; this is completely obvious to everybody by now. Except for eighty percent of the Christians I know.] (Galatians 3:10-11)

Do you see and understand? If we use familiar language but do not shift to the Christian perspectives, we put faith in exactly the wrong directions. Most of the culture around us is doing that, and therefore it will be scathing in its denunciations of us – if it ever understands where we are coming from and what we really believe. That is one of the reasons we need the armor.

“Yet whatever gains I had [from trying to do good], these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. [That is, having a real and actual relationship with Jesus.] For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own not having a righteousness of my own not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [not having a righteousness that comes from any of my good efforts], but one that comes through faith in Christ [putting my trust in Him], the righteousness from God based on faith.” (Philippians 3:7-9)

Are we still trying to be proud of our rubbish and garbage? Well, maybe not for two or three hours now. Of course, the real problem is that rubbish and garbage do not protect your heart. If you put on the wrong breastplate, all the guilt, fear, and anguish just come flooding on in as fast and as overwhelming as before you put on the armor. We cannot just put on any old armor we want. It has to be the whole armor of God, or it will do us little good.

We could go to passage after passage in Paul’s writings to get this very different perspective. Most of us have to do that numerous times before we really “get it.” It is amazing how insidious and insistent our determination is to keep returning to faith in our own good intentions, and whatever ways we try to act them out. If we ever do put our real faith in Jesus, He does eventually allow us to do some good deeds – under His guidance. But their motive has to be true gratitude, never our desire to be good or look good. Anyway, if you want protection for your heart, here it is: “*A righteousness not my own!*” (A righteousness from God: based on a relationship with God – based on God’s love for me. Never mind *my* love for anybody. That always comes afterward.)

Shoes for our feet – THE GOSPEL OF PEACE.

Why are we talking about our feet? Because we are messengers, travelers. We are carrying the Gospel. And what is the Gospel Message? Peace. We should all be more peaceful. Peace on earth. Let's all kiss and make up. Let's all learn to be reconcilers. Wonderful! So we hardly get the breastplate put on and adjusted, and we are going to throw it away again? If we cannot get past the kittycrap and the bullshit of what we *want* life to be like here on earth – what we try to pretend it's like, what maybe we all wish it were like – how are we going to survive in the real warfare?

The Gospel of peace is not about peace on earth. It is about peace between us and God. "Peace" on the W-W levels isn't worth diddly. Well, that isn't entirely true; it is wonderful in some moments. But it comes and goes too fast for us to build very much on. What we care about is "peace" on the W-S levels (the Way of the Spirit). Peace with God, once we have accepted it, burns with a steady and everlasting flame. It is wondrous, no matter what is or seems to be going on all around us.

To be sure, we all start out in anger, animosity, resentments, and severe mistrust of God. God created things too hard, too unfair, too hurtful to us and everybody we love. The Gospel – which, we must never forget, comes out of a Cross – is about peace between us and God. Jesus is the true reconciler because He establishes the love bond between us and God. Whatever further "peace" may come from that, we welcome with gratitude and joy. But we also stay ready and undeterred if, in this world, the peace evaporates and goes back to anger or conflict again.

All true relationship starts in relationship with God. For most of us, that begins with trusting Jesus. But we try to keep the Message straight or it all backfires on us, taking us into depression or worse. This is not a worldly peace – it is peace between us and God. In any case, that is the Message we carry. Like the shoes on our feet, it goes wherever we go.

On our arm we carry THE SHIELD OF FAITH.

Paul's imagery goes a step further here. He pictures Satan (the evil one), and perhaps some of Satan's servants, shooting flaming arrows at us. Faith, I keep insisting (because of what Jesus told us), is not a set of right beliefs. Faith means trust. Faith is always faith in something,

or in some One. We trust Jesus to know God, and so, because of all that Jesus went through to reach us (death and resurrection and returning as Holy Spirit), we trust that God really does love us.

What are the flaming arrows that try to kill us – that try to burn down all our defenses? “You are no good.” “Nobody really loves you, or cares about you.” “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” “As soon as people find out what you are really like, they will want nothing more to do with you. Everybody will shun and abandon you.” “There is no way you can ever make up for all the damage and wrong you have done.” “Everything you ever try to do goes bad – turns to nothing, to ashes. You might as well give up and forget it.” “Nothing matters. Nothing lasts. Nothing is really worth it.” And on and on.

But that is from the evil one. The love of God truly makes us impervious – at least for any permanent damage – to all the negative, destructive lies and accusations of the Destroyer (and his disciples). One of the things that will last is you – you and everyone you love. Your future is bright beyond imagining. Your Savior is true and beautiful and powerful – and good beyond all reckoning. Take heart! It is I! Have no fear!

On our heads we wear THE HELMET OF SALVATION.

This is not salvation from Hell. Of course, we could get that too, if we needed it. But the construct is flawed to begin with. We are not *going* to Hell; we have all tasted the alienation, the loneliness, the meaninglessness and anguish – the bondage – of the way of the world. Our problem is not some theoretical bad end we might be coming to. Our problem is the very real and present experience of being trapped and bound in an imperfect world where nothing is as it should be – and where we are not as we should be. We do not need to be frightened about the future; we need to be freed from that which enslaves us in the present: Sin, Death, and the Devil. With a little pondering and some clear insight into our present condition, we realize that this triumvirate stands for three categories which sum up everything that is going wrong for us and our world.

Salvation, then, is freedom from our real bondage, in all its manifestations: addictions; failures; defeats; fears; complexes; people around us being used by evil forces; good people around us trying to control us because they care; and on and on.

Belonging to Christ means we belong to no other – good, bad, or in between. And the authority of Christ’s love is stronger than all the bonds and bondage we encounter here. Salvation means we are set free from all false gods, good or evil. Because we die to this world and are born anew into awareness of the dimensions of the Way of the Spirit, we are set free from the domination of all idols – from all the false purposes, bribes, and siren calls of this world.

This is not what most people mean by “salvation” in our time. I hope that something akin to this is what *you* mean by salvation. What happens to us if we do not wear this helmet? That’s easy: We get our heads beat in. Look around you; you see it happening to people everywhere.

Our only weapon – THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT.

Many call it a two-edged sword because it cuts keenly both ways. (Cutting truth from error; cutting worldly wisdom from spiritual wisdom; cutting away pretense and illusion; cutting through excuses, subterfuge, and falsehood.) It is featured in the Book of Revelation, at least in the nineteenth chapter. With this one weapon we can slay all our enemies – at least if we are thinking in W-S terms. Of course, we do not win all our battles in this realm. Do we need to be reminded?

The sword of the Spirit (in Revelation, it issues from the mouth of Christ) does not harm anybody physically. It is imperative that we remember what kind of fight we are in, and what kind of weapon is appropriate for spiritual warriors. The sword of the Spirit is the word of God’s love. This is the only weapon we are allowed to use on our enemies. We pray for them. We want them to discover their true identity under God. We hope for the day when they will truly come into their own. We are eager for them to come to know Jesus.

To be sure, this sword of the Spirit will slay them. Just like it did us. It kills by converting us – by transforming us. It exchanges new lives for old. It reveals who we really are, what our purpose truly is, and what our spiritual identity and destiny are like (at least as much as we can fathom from this place and time). The death this sword brings is the death of baptism: we die to this world, and into a New WAY of Life. So this weapon is particularly exciting and well-loved in *The New Church*. It matches our motto and theme: “*Behold, I am making all things new.*” (Revelation 21:5)

Okay, that's the six. Where is the seventh? And of course, the seventh is the most important of all: PRAY AT ALL TIMES.

Back to the Way of Jesus. Always and ever it depends on our staying close to the source – staying in constant and continual contact with the Holy Spirit – seeking guidance, obeying instructions, checking our plans and goals and choices and approaches with our real Leader, our Lord, our Savior.

I hope no one thinks we have covered this passage, or that we have fully explored the armor we need and want to wear. This was only an introduction – and a strong suggestion that now you need to go to work to fill in the many meanings and applications for your own life. Along the way, don't forget Paul's real point: Put it on. *“Put on the whole armor of God.”*

P.S. Some people prefer the short form: *“Let Christ Jesus himself be the armor that you wear.”* (Romans 13:14) Did Paul write Romans before or after Ephesians?