

Gridiron Gospel II

Ephesians 6: 10-18



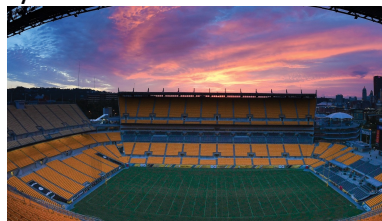
I don't expect anyone to remember this, but last year on Super Bowl Sunday, I had a sermon called Gridiron Gospel. I didn't mention this last year, but that was designed to be an ongoing series of sermons where we will take some element of football and see if we can pull out a scripture lesson.

And so here we are, one year later, with a new entry of Gridiron Gospel. The good news is that you don't need to remember what we talked about last year.

But enough about last year, because there is a football game on TV tonight!

That's important to remember. Regardless of who sings the national anthem, who performs at halftime, who is or isn't in the VIP suites, or how good or bad the commercials are, there is still a game happening on the field.

And this game has a reputation, even if it's a reputation the league is trying to dispel in recent years. Football is a rough and dangerous, even violent, game. It has such a reputation that the field itself has taken on some really vibrant nicknames.



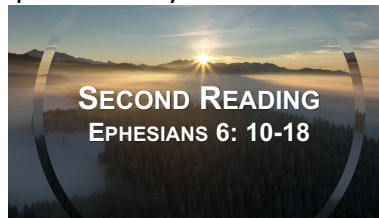
I looked up some synonyms for football field this week. One of them is in the title of this sermon. Gridiron just sounds tough, doesn't it? I also found words like "battlefield" and "battleground." Some stadiums that contain the fields also have intense names, with words like "coliseum" and "soldier" adorning the buildings where the action happens.

Football certainly has that feeling of two sides going to battle, of testing and besting each other until one side stands victorious at the end. So it stands to reason that participants in this battle need to wear the right gear.



We are used to seeing this gear by now, and we know what it looks like. Players wear protective helmets with metal facemasks. Underneath their jerseys are pads that protect their shoulders, chests, and legs. From their head down to their shoes, which happen to be cleats for traction, players wear the gear they need to remain as safe as possible.

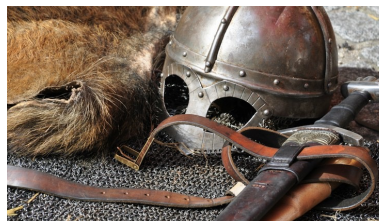
And this is why I asked you all to wear something football related today. I wanted us to feel in some small way connected to this idea of putting on gear. To transition, I wanted us to feel like we had some piece of “armor” to put on today.



I wanted to do this because our Epistle reading today also talks about armor. Let’s read together from Ephesians chapter six, the 10th through 18th verses:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.



We could spend weeks diving into each piece of armor Paul mentions here, and I wouldn’t be surprised if we end up doing that one of these days. But for now, I’ll say just a little bit about the armor Paul talks about.

Around our waist, we have a belt made of truth. This isn't what the world tells us is true. It's what God tells us is true.

Our breastplate is made of righteousness. God has placed on our hearts what it means to live in a way that glorifies Him, so protecting our heart from trouble in turn protects our righteousness.

Our feet are equipped with shoes that help us stand in peace. Wherever God calls you to go, you can go in readiness because your feet are protected with a peace that only God provides.

We have a shield of faith. We have faith that this shield protects us from incoming threats, or as Paul puts it, the flaming arrows from the devil. Those things that would burn us down, faith shields us from.

We have a helmet of salvation. It's easy for our minds to wander into unprotected territory. This helmet of salvation is our saving grace. The head is a fragile and vital part of our body, and like a helmet for our heads, our salvation protects and renews us.

Finally, our sword of the Spirit. Paul makes this clear by saying this is the Word of God. We are told that the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword. When we need to defend ourselves, we can be assured that God's Word is the best way to repel any attacker.



Like I said, each one is a sermon in itself. But I would like to focus on a couple other parts of this passage that I don't feel get enough attention when we talk about spiritual armor.

The first of those things is why we even need this armor. We are also told in scripture that everything we do, we are to do in love. So where does this imagery around armor fit in to that? Why prepare ourselves for battle if we are to be a people of peace?

I think this is important to understand because too many Christians don't understand what their armor is for. We pick up our sword and our shield in situations that don't call for it. We can be combative with people around us, people that we're supposed to reach with a message of love and redemption.

So what does call for our armor?

Paul is clear in what is our battle and what is not our battle.

Our battle is *not* physical. That probably doesn't feel right because there is so much in this world that's against us. You may feel like someone in your life is trying to tear you down. You may feel like your job is holding you back. You may feel like your health is dragging you down.

So me standing in front of you telling you that your battle is not a physical battle feels wrong.

But our armor not meant to be used for worldly things, not even against someone you disagree with politically or even theologically.

If we use our armor for flesh and blood, physical, worldly battles, we're using it wrong.

We can reinforce this point by realizing that every piece of spiritual armor Paul mentions is defensive. Even that sword, because the Greek word Paul uses for "sword" means a smaller, short sword. These were commonly used in close combat, when your enemy was right up against you. It was also defensive.

So what use is this armor if we're not supposed to go out and use it? Paul says the answer to this is that our battle, and the armor that we've been given, is spiritual.



When we starting talking about spiritual warfare, I'm afraid some of us shut off at that moment. This whole supernatural battle raging around us in a realm that we can't see...I'll grant you, it does sound outlandish. And if it doesn't sound outlandish, it probably sounds scary.

But our Bible takes it seriously. Paul takes it seriously. In fact, he thinks this issue is so real and he takes it so seriously that he articulates this idea of armor to protect us from the attacks of our enemy.

Make no mistake. There is an enemy. The devil will try anything to get us farther away from our God. So this armor is for protection. This armor is for the times when we feel like we are so beaten down and worn out spiritually that we can't go on anymore.

Last week, I talked to you about the fact that we're on a hard road. And this is one of those things that makes it a harder road. I believe that the closer we get to Godly living, the harder the devil will try to distract us.

That's when we need our belt of truth, our breastplate of righteousness, our shoes of peace, our shield of faith, our helmet of salvation, and our sword of the Spirit.

But if I'm being honest, that doesn't always feel like enough. Armor has weaknesses, and so do we. And in some ways, it feels like we've just enlisted in a war, been handed our uniform, and told, "Good luck!"

Now, that sounds ominous. I know. But this isn't all scary.

The second part of this passage I want to focus on is the good news part. The first part wasn't necessarily bad news, because we have protection, but it also tells us that we're under siege. Paul says this armor is for *when* the day of evil comes. Not "if" – "when."

But there is good news. This is a very hopeful situation.

Twice here, Paul gives us the marching orders. He doesn't tell us to advance, he doesn't tell us to retreat. If we go back to the football analogy, it's not 4th down. We're not in a two minute drill at the end of the game where we need to drive down the field for a chance to win.

Paul tells us twice that we are already in our victory formation. A victory formation in football is when you know you have the game won, so you don't need to run big plays. You really just need to stay where you are until the game is done. This is usually when you see teams kneel down at the end of games. They know they've won and there's no need to push down the field.



Paul tells us to stand our ground. He tells us to put on our gear and stand firm.

That means we're already on the winning end of this battle. If you are in a position where you're told to stand your ground, to stand firm, that means don't move. That means that all around you, the battle can rage, but you are on victorious ground. All you need to do is trust in your armor and stand firm.

And that's great news! When you feel like your battle is raging, when you feel like the game can be lost at any moment, this is great news.

This tells us that no matter how many hits we're taking, no matter how strong we think our opponent is, we are already on victorious ground.

Christ already died for us, God has already offered us His mercy and His grace, and salvation is already ours. The gameplan has already played out; there aren't any more plays that need to be run. We just need to stand firm.



I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that once you leave this building, you're going to see someone in football gear. It might be on your televisions tonight, it might be on a picture or a display in the grocery store, it might be on your phone as your flipping through Facebook.

My hope today is that as you see that, or even as you remember you are wearing your own football gear today, you can be reminded that you already have all the tools you need to stand your ground. You have your spiritual armor for when the battle rages in your life.

You are protected in truth and in righteousness, in peace and in faith, in salvation and in the Spirit.

You are already on winning ground, and all you need is to stand firm.

And all of God's people said...