

## ***Ready To Wrestle: God's Sacred Armor For The Battle*** ***Ephesians 6:10-20***

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Sometimes putting on clothing takes a lot of focused and conscious thought. After 28 years of wearing the cowboy boots that I bought my senior year in college, I had worn through the sole enough times that I finally went to buy new ones. I tried on no less than eight pairs trying to find the look and fit that I wanted. Finally, I walked out of the store committed to my new pair of boots.

Our text today tells us to think carefully about putting on sacred apparel for war in a far more significant way than a new pair of cowboy boots. The command to put on the whole armor of God comes after a very important word to start the paragraph. Paul begins, “Finally.....Finally, be strong in the Lord...Put on the whole armor of God.” Reading through the entire book of Ephesians, one can feel the weight of what Paul means when he says, “Finally!”

Finally, you who have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing, chosen before the foundation of the world to be adopted to God as sons. Finally, remember that you have redemption through Christ's blood, have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, and have obtained an inheritance. Don't forget that this isn't how it has always been; you were once dead in the trespasses of your sin, carrying out the desires of the flesh, separated from Christ, without hope and God in the world, and by nature children of wrath. Finally, dear believers of Ephesus, remember, when you were dead in your trespasses, by grace God saved you and made you alive together with Christ. So, finally, when you hear “be strong” and “put on,” those commands come after five chapters of foundational footing.

This armor of God passage is an incredibly popular text. When you were a child, you probably had your mother sew a helmet and give you a cardboard wrapping paper cylinder to arrive at VBS in full battle attire. But though the armor of God is familiar, we must not become callous to the severity of what Paul says is happening. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic forces over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. There is currently a battle against the scheming devil that Paul describes as a wrestling match. Some of our youth in this church wrestle for their high schools: Stone Bennett, Charles Lewis Gilcrease, Joshua Munson; I too wrestled in high school. I commend you. I know what it is like to lock arms with your opponent and feel with your hands the muscle being thrust against you. I know what it's like to have your opponent shove your face into the mat with a forearm or elbow. The type of battle Paul is describing is an up close, smell-your-opponent's-sweat kind of hand-to-hand battle. When I was in high school, before every big meet and for extra advantage, my buddy Gary would be sure to eat onions and garlic. Why? Wrestling is intensely intimate.

Paul says that not only is our adversary within intensely intimate proximity to us, every

description of the enemy following the scheming devil is plural...“Rulers”, “Authorities”, “Cosmic powers”, and “Spiritual forces.” We know that the devil is not omni-present, and he cannot be everywhere like our mighty God, but he has legions of forces of evil. They inhabit the heavenly realms, run about the rest of creation, and have a vast organized hierarchy. In Daniel chapter 10, an angel comes to Daniel to tell him that his prayers have been heard, but he was delayed in coming for 21 days because he was withstood by the angelic prince of the kingdom of Persia. But finally, Michael, one of the chief angelic princes came to his aid so that he was able to come to Daniel. Whatever the exact designations amongst the angels, Paul is saying that a great demonic enemy with a defined and disciplined chain of command is currently arrayed in the heavenly realms against the believers in Ephesus.

Because of this, Paul tells them to “be strong” and “put on” the whole armor of God so that they may stand against the devil and his henchman. Be strong is in the present tense and thus has a continual ongoing-nature to it - do not stop being strong. The second command, “put on”, is different. Being in the aorist tense, this command has a punctuated, consciously-do-it-now kind of nuance.

Let’s think deeply about what we are to consciously put on. Currently, you are engaged in a certain type of battle and putting on the right armor is paramount to victory. If you are a drone pilot for the marines, your uniform is going to look different than the hand-to-hand urban tactical gear a SWAT team will wear. Choose the right gear for battle and deliberately put it on. Most of us have never worn a military uniform or police tactical gear, but we do know what it is like to put on clothing of significance. I asked a doctor this week what it was like to put on his white coat for the first time in med school. Married ladies, what was it like when time after time of wearing bridesmaids dresses, you finally got to be the one clothed the beautiful gown of white? Do you recall the weight, significance, and intentionality of deliberately putting the garment on? Paul says we are to dutifully put on the armor of God.

The challenge when reading scripture about the armor of God is that one of two things happens: we are motivated for a moment; we believe in Satan and spiritual warfare, so in our prayer times we consciously “put on” the armor. But we inevitably get lazy and slip back into unconscious disbelief. The other reality is that we stay motivated to put on the armor, but we get fixated on the armor itself and it becomes a dutiful checklist of Christian disciplines. Our confidence flexes or wains depending on how we’ve done any given day or week keeping the performance checklist.

I have good news for you this morning concerning either of these pitfalls. When Paul was inspired to write, he wasn’t only thinking about the gleam of the shiny Roman sword or the pristine condition of the new leather belt wrapped around the waist of the Roman soldier. Though living in a Roman world, Paul was first a Hebrew. The Hebrew understanding of the armor of God, which dated hundreds of years before the Roman’s, would have been on the forefront of his mind. The significance of this was wonderfully depicted in an article on Desiring God’s website by Dr. Iain Duguid and from which I gleaned many points for this sermon. I quote Dr. Duguid, “[Realizing that the armor described in Ephesians 6 has an Old Testament background,] challenges the common view that the Christian armor is primarily a set of disciplines we must perform to measure up as Christians. It is certainly true that God’s armor

describes essential qualities for us to pursue passionately if we are to stand firm under Satan's assault. Yet the armor is first and foremost God's armor rather than ours."<sup>1</sup>

This leads us to two main points for this sermon: 1. You are being commanded to put on used battle armor. 2. This used battle armor has already seen victory.

What do I mean by we're offered used battle armor to put on? Unlike Harry Potter gazing up at a brand new shiny Nimbus 2000 in the Broom Shop of Diagon Alley, Paul isn't gazing at brand new shiny Roman armor to slip on. Each of the pieces of armor in Ephesians 6 are found in ancient Hebrew scripture where the divine warrior gives the saints his battle-hardened equipment. You don't want the shiny Roman stuff; put on the battle armor already used by the divine warrior.

Consider Isaiah 59:17. In this chapter written in the 8th century BC, Isaiah is describing Israel's ancient foe, the Babylonians, and how God is going to fight against them on Israel's behalf. He says, "He [God] 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. According to their [the Babylonians] deeds, so will he repay; wrath to his adversaries..." Long before Paul was held prisoner in a Roman cell, God himself wore a breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation on Israel's behalf.

The Roman breastplate was a metal piece which covered the front of the body, protecting the vital organs. Often made of chain mail, it was effective in warding off the deadly thrusts of the popular short sword. Paul isn't telling the Ephesians, "Look at this awesome new shiny breastplate; don't forget to put it on; you're going to need it." This is a benevolent command. But it is one more thing in the daily bustle of life that the Christian has to do. Far greater is the Hebrew understanding that God himself has worn righteousness in battle, and he gives us his battle-hardened breastplate of righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, you and I are not righteous on our own. If we were to try to maintain our own breastplate of righteousness, we might feel prepared when we're faithfully going to church, avoiding gross sin, and generally trying to be a good person. But Paul says in Romans, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Worthless" literally means "damaged beyond use." The metal of our breastplate has been worn thin by our shortcomings, the chain mail has gaping holes because of our callous and hard hearts towards the prompting of the spirit. Don't be distracted and deceived by trying to maintain your personal breastplate. By faith, put on the righteousness of the holy divine warrior who wears his breastplate on your behalf. He has fought for ancient Israel, he will fight for you.

When a Roman soldier tightened his belt, his tunic was cinched to his body, and his sword would be held firmly in place. This would enable him to charge, grapple, or wield whatever

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<sup>1</sup> Duguid, Iain. "Sacred Weapons for Spiritual War: Wearing the Whole Armor of God", [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) June 21, 2019.

weapon of war was needed for victory. Truth performs a similar function in spiritual warfare, for it is what holds all other spiritual armor close to the body and allows one to be effective. But the belt of truth also predates a Roman centurion. Leading up to Isaiah 11, God brings horrible judgment upon Assyria and then promises his people Israel, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, . . . .Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for faithfulness in this Old Testament passage describing the belt around the messianic figure’s loins is the same Greek word translated truth in Ephesians 6. The toxic effects of the sin plaguing Israel would be reversed by a future messianic figure who was an heir of the line of David, whose core qualities are truth and faithfulness.

The reality of ancient Hebrew battle armor is true for the Roman shield as well. Yet the shield of faith is not something that God puts on to defend Israel, it is who God is on behalf of Israel. Genesis 15:1 the Lord tells Abraham, “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” In Proverbs 30:5 God says, “I am a shield to those who take refuge in him.” When Paul sees the Roman shield that can absorb the arrows of the enemy and snuff out the flames by embedding the point deep within the wooden substrate, he is calling upon the knowledge that God himself is already acting as a shield for his saints. God shielded Israel from her ancient enemies in the time Abraham, he continues to be a shield for his beloved now.

Paul’s image of “feet readied with the gospel of peace” is illustrated by the Roman sandal. The sandal’s sole was nail-studded to allow the centurion to hold a strong defensive position as well as advance with cleat-like grip. But Paul would also be thinking of Isaiah 52:7, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news...who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” The beleaguered watchmen on Zion’s walls ran to deliver the news that Yahweh reigns, and Paul wants the Ephesians to know as well that the gospel proclaims, “Your God reigns.”

In a similar way, the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, is promised by Isaiah to bring light to the Gentiles 700 years before Paul. Isaiah says of his servant in 49:2,6 “[The Lord] made my mouth like a sharp sword...[to be] a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Like the Roman double-edged short sword, which is the most effective weapon for hand-to-hand combat, God’s Word is the ultimate weapon for spiritual grappling.

For those of us who are too weak to put on God’s armor today, who don’t feel like we deserve to wear the armor because we fell to sin again last night, who feel like we just never measure up as a Christian, we may resonate with the comments of Blaise Pascal. He was the 17th century physicist and philosopher, who once said, “What is man but the glory and the refuse of the universe?” We are the glory because we bear the image of the divine Godhead everywhere we go, and yet we are the trash of the universe because we repeatedly don’t measure up to our potential. If we fail to put on the armor of God as commanded, there is already one who wears the armor on our behalf. He is fighting for us now and is proclaiming his good news to the weary and heavy laden.

My last word of encouragement to you from Ephesians 6 is this: Not only has the battle armor offered to you already been worn on your behalf by God hundreds of years before Paul

was eyeing Roman apparel, that armor has already seen victory. Jesus reigns victorious on our behalf. Jesus is the triumphant warrior that used the truth of God's Word to defeat Satan in the desert. Jesus is the one who girded his loins and for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus stood firm in his battle, and for everyone who by faith is joined together in Christ, you will ultimately stand firm as well. Because by faith, his righteousness became ours, and in Christ, we have a shield of refuge in God that will never leave us or forsake us. Though these things are true, that doesn't mean that we aren't to heed Paul's command to today consciously choose to put on God's spiritual armor. The daily battles we face are real. Have you thought deeply about what you've been grappling with lately? Is it possible that life isn't just hard but a spiritual battle is being waged by a cunning and formidable adversary against you?

On September 17, I went to our bank to take \$80 cash out of the ATM. It said there was a problem and to speak to a teller. I went in and the teller read me a statement, "Chase bank is terminating their relationship with you, and your funds will be returned in 6-8 weeks by money order." Just like that, with no explanation, no apparent instigating circumstances, and after 22 years of banking with Chase, all of the money that we had in our accounts was instantly unavailable. No money to pay the mortgage, make car payments, or get money to Lexi in Michigan. It's 5 months later and Chase still has not returned all of my money. After countless hours on the phone, they claim they are sending another check, though it continues to not show up. Is this spiritual battle?

You might have a loved one who keeps turning their back on the Lord and on you. Maybe there's a medical issue that though the doctors are hopeful, it seems that you can't get a straight answer, and you're feeling worse than before. Has the silent treatment in your house gone on for way longer this time than it ever has before? Is this spiritual battle? Is the wrestling real?

Whether I am confident that my personal example of bank trouble is spiritual battle or simply the result of living in a fallen world, I know this: I have been praying fervently for God to return what seems to be stolen from me. Some days I confidently suit up with the helmet of salvation and boldly approach God's throne asking, "Dear Father, please intervene, for I so often feel powerless." And there are also days when I am distracted or discouraged, and I barely utter a prayer for a breakthrough. But I am encouraged by this: Even if I don't call the bank enough times or put on the belt of truth tight enough today, God is fighting that battle with me. He tells me to put on the armor and stand firm, for the armor is already battle tested and Christ will win the ultimate victory over the sin and rebellion of this world.

Today as we wrap up this sermon and go into a time of reflection, you might try on some of God's armor but find that it feels foreign. It seems you haven't worn it in a while, or the straps need to be adjusted. Paul's warning is still true, we wrestle against formidable adversaries in the heavenly realms, but Christ reigns victorious, fights on our behalf, and has ultimately transferred his victory to us.