

## The Christian Life (26): Sanctification (Part 11)

Having girded his loins with truth, the Christian soldier must next put on his breastplate: "having girded your waist with truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness." "Truth and righteousness are closely connected, like the sister-curtains of the tabernacle (Ex.26:13), and it is pity any should unclasp them which God has so fitted to each other" (Gurnall).<sup>1</sup>

Christ Himself is the Christian's armory. When he puts on Christ, he is then completely armed from head to foot. Are his loins girt about with truth? Christ is the truth. Has he on the breastplate of righteousness? Christ is our righteousness. Are his feet shod with the gospel of peace? Christ is our peace. Does he take the shield of faith, and helmet of salvation? Christ is that shield, and all our salvation. Does he take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God? Christ is the Word of God. Thus he puts on the Lord Jesus Christ, for Christ is all in all.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Armor of God: The Breastplate of Righteousness

1. *What is it?* The term "righteousness" literally refers to that which is "right before God." Scripture uses the term to refer to positional and personal righteousness. By positional righteousness is meant our standing before God in Christ. This refers to our justification wherein we are declared righteous in Christ. This is perfect and positional and can neither become better or worse. We are righteous in Him by way of imputation. "In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: The LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer.23:6). "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (Rom.1:16-17). "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil.3:8-9). By practical righteousness is meant an imparted righteousness that begins with our regeneration and change of nature. Unlike positional righteousness, this is created within us and concerns our sanctification. It is imperfect and ever-growing in this life. "Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph.4:24). "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth)" (Eph.5:8-9).

This brings us to the all-important question, What righteousness serves as the breastplate for the Christian soldier? While our position and practical righteousness must be distinguished, they can never be severed. "The New Testament never separates imputed righteousness from imparted righteousness. The two must always be distinguished, but they must never be separated. The perfect righteousness of Christ which is imputed, or placed in the account of believers, is also imparted to them" (Hamilton).<sup>3</sup> "As with the two possible meanings of 'truth,' so with the two possible meanings of 'righteousness,' it may well be right to combine them, since according to Paul's gospel the one would invariably lead to the other" (Stott).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the OT regularly used the single term "righteousness" as a description of our salva-

<sup>1</sup> William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 1:411

<sup>2</sup> John Bunyan, *Works*, 3:110, n.2

<sup>3</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 272

<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 279

tion (justification and sanctification). "The LORD has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations" (Ps.98:2). "Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the LORD, have created it" (Isa.45:8). "No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is from Me, says the LORD" (Isa.54:17). "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak" (Isa.59:16-17).

Thus, while our positional (justification) and practical (sanctification) righteousness must be distinguished, they can never be severed as they together form our salvation (from the penalty and power of sin). This salvation has been purchased by Christ and is possessed by every Christian (Matt.5:20; 1Cor.1:30). And so, while our positional and practical righteousness must never be totally separated from each other, only the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to our account and received by faith can fully serve as our breastplate. "The righteousness of the breastplate is provided by God in Christ. Christ earned that righteousness through His passive and active obedience. Only this combination of passive and active obedience was sufficient to fully satisfy God's justice. All other forms of righteousness are worthless" (Beeke).<sup>5</sup> "What Christian can boast of entire rectitude or righteousness? But when the justifying righteousness of Christ is assumed as a breastplate by sinners, they can defy the assaults of the tempter" (Eadie).<sup>6</sup> "Because Paul describes this breastplate as 'of God,' it seems what he principally, if not exclusively, has in mind is Christ, the LORD our righteousness (Rom.5:18; 1Cor.1:30). Our own righteousness would be no ultimate deterrent—or indeed any deterrent—to the devil and his schemes" (Hamilton).<sup>7</sup>

Our breastplate is the righteousness of Christ put on by faith. No righteousness of our own could be proof against Satan; since it is always still imperfect, it would be promptly pierced. Our righteousness of good works ever needs Christ's merits and righteousness to cover up its imperfection. After describing the horrible power of our demon foes, as Paul does in v12, it would be folly to send us against them with works that our own hands have done.<sup>8</sup>

What is that righteousness which in the spiritual armor answers to the breastplate? Many say it is our own righteousness, integrity, or rectitude of mind. But this is no protection. It cannot resist the accusations of conscience, the whispers of despondency, the power of temptation, much less the severity of the law or the assaults of Satan. What Paul desired for himself was not to have on his own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God by faith (Phil.3:8-9); and this, doubtless, is the righteousness which he here urges believers to put on as a breastplate. It is an infinitely perfect righteousness, consisting in the obedience and sufferings of the Son of God, which satisfies all the demands of the divine law and justice, and which is a sure defense against all assaults whether from within or from without.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan*, 46

<sup>6</sup> John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, 468

<sup>7</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 271

<sup>8</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians*, 666

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 283

We cannot possibly accept 'integrity' as the right and the adequate interpretation here. Obviously we do not reject it because we are opposed to integrity. Integrity is essential everywhere. You cannot hope to do anything without it; but it is of very little value when you are face to face with the devil. Man's integrity at its best is but as wax before the devil. If you imagine that by relying upon your own inherent goodness and rightness and moral rectitude, you can without the wiles of the devil, you are the merest tyro (apprentice) in these matters. Integrity is not a 'breastplate' that is adequate to meet the 'fiery darts' and all the other instruments and implements the devil uses against us. Integrity is good, but natural integrity and goodness is as nothing when confronted by the guile and the wiles of the enemy who is standing opposed to us. He can bring us into utter condemnation if we rely upon our own goodness.<sup>10</sup>

This doesn't mean our practical righteousness isn't important or has nothing to do with our breastplate. Our practical righteousness (holiness) argues the reality of our positional righteousness. Thus the presence of the former proves the existence of the latter. And so, in this qualified sense, our personal and practical righteousness can be viewed as the Christian's breastplate, only as it argues that I am in Christ and have His perfect righteousness imputed to my account. "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous" (1Jn.3:7). That is, the person who is living righteously, proves that he is positionally righteous, just as Christ is righteous. Practical righteousness argues positional righteousness. "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1Jn.3:10).

2. *Why is it important?* "In Paul's day, soldiers wore a protective breastplate made of metal or very tough leather. The breastplate covered the chest and the abdomen, protecting vital organs from swords and other weapons. The breastplate was a critical defense against mortal and lesser wounds" (Beeke).<sup>11</sup> "A Roman soldier's breastplate often covered his back as well as his front, and was his major piece of armor protecting all his most vital organs" (Stott).<sup>12</sup> "For a soldier to go into battle without the protection of a breastplate would be virtual suicide. He would be leaving unguarded his most vulnerable area against the assaults of his enemy" (Hamilton).<sup>13</sup> "A warrior without his breastplate was naked, exposed to every thrust of his enemy, and even to every causal dart. In such a state flight or death is inevitable" (Hodge).<sup>14</sup>

The breastplate preserves the principal part of the body, and that is the breast, where the very vitals of man are closely couched together, and where a shot or stab is more deadly than in other parts that are remote from the fountain of life. A man may outlive many wounds received in the arms or legs, but a stab in the heart or other vital parts is the certain messenger of death approaching. Thus righteousness preserves the principal part of a Christian—his soul and conscience. We live or die spiritually, yea eternally, as we look to our souls and consciences. It is not a wound in estate, credit, or any other enjoyment, that kills us in this sense. These touch not, hazard not, the Christian's life, any

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<sup>10</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 7:225

<sup>11</sup> Joel Beeke, *Striving Against Satan*, 46

<sup>12</sup> John Stott, *Ephesians*, 278

<sup>13</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, 270

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 283

more than the shaving of the beard, hazards the man's life. Spiritual vitals are seated in the soul and conscience.<sup>15</sup>

(1) The breastplate protects us from accusations. Just as the breastplate protected the vital organs of the Roman soldier (heart, kidneys, etc.), our breastplate protects our spiritual organs (heart and conscience). While Scripture uses the term heart to refer to our thinking and feeling, it also uses to describe our conscience. "And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people" (2Sam.24:10). "Now it happened afterward that David's heart troubled him because he had cut Saul's robe" (1Sam.24:5). In both of these examples, the heart refers to the conscience ('David's conscience bothered him,' NASB, 'David was conscience-stricken,' NIV). This is also found in the NT: "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (1Jn.3:20). Even if our conscience misfunctions, God knows the truth. Thus, an important role of our breastplate is to protect the heart (conscience) from either condemning us wrongly or too strongly. This is where Satan enters the battle, as "the accuser of the brethren" (Rev.12:10). "How can you be a true Christian if you think and act as you do?" "You call yourself a Christian, but you often fail to read your Bible and pray." "Why would God truly love someone as yourself?" These and other questions or accusations are daily directed at the Christian soldier, and nothing less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ can protect us from them.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?' Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' And to him He said, 'See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.' And I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by.<sup>16</sup>

As the high priest, Joshua represented the nation. They had recently returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild the temple and city. Because of opposition and indifference the work had ceased. God sent Zechariah to encourage them. Satan sought to discourage them by reminding them of the sin that brought them into captivity. This is why Joshua was "clothed with filthy garments." They were natively guilty. Thus, God doesn't deny this reality. They were by nature guilty and filthy. But notice, the LORD not only took away the "filthy garments from him" but he then dressed him with a "clean turban" and "rich robes." This is true of every believer. Yes, we are by nature filthy and guilty. But God has taken away our iniquity and robed us with the righteousness of Christ. This is how we face the accusations of Satan and our conscience. "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1Jn.2:1-2). When Christians sin, they must hid behind their Advocate (breastplate) who is their righteousness and propitiation. "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Rom.8:33-34).

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<sup>15</sup> William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 1:410

<sup>16</sup> Zechariah 3:1-5

Let us equip ourselves against the accusations of Satan with this and similar passages of Holy Scripture. If he says, 'Thou shalt be damned,' you tell him: 'No, for I fly to Christ who gave Himself for my sins. In accusing me of being a damnable sinner, you are cutting your own throat, Satan. You are reminding me of God's fatherly goodness toward me, that He so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. In calling me a sinner, Satan, you really comfort me above measure.' With such heavenly cunning we are to meet the devil's craft and put from us the memory of sin.<sup>17</sup>

"Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever" (Isa.32:16-17). This is a prophecy of Gospel days. The "work" or "effect of righteousness" will be "peace, quietness, and assurance forever." This refers to a calm or peaceful conscience. The assurance of salvation. "What a calm does it bring into the soul, when, upon the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, God says to the soul, 'There is now therefore no condemnation to him that is in Christ Jesus; because the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in him;' all the storms of law terrors are then hushed into a pleasant calm" (Erskine).<sup>18</sup> It's because we've made peace with God in Christ, that we now have peace of soul and conscience. It's knowledge of the first (peace with God) that gives the second (peace of God). "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom.5:1).

(2) The breastplate protects us from depression. Not only does Scripture connect the heart to our conscience but also to our affections. It's the heart that rejoices (Ps.13:5), grieves (Ps.73:21), and sorrows (Ps.13:2). It is the aim of Satan to keep us in our doubting, dejected, and depressed mood. But the breastplate of righteousness reminds us we are not only forgiven but accepted. It argues our acceptance before God as His children and co-heirs with Christ. "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isa.61:10). Christian soldiers must not trust in their feelings (happiness or sorrow). These change with the weather. "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name; on Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."<sup>19</sup>

There are many Christians, who, because they have not put on the breastplate of righteousness, are very unhappy; the devil has 'got' them, and has defeated them simply because they have never known exactly what it means to put on this breastplate. I am referring, primarily, to moods and variations in our feelings and sensibilities. We must all have discovered long since that feelings come and go; and the devil, of course, is well aware of that. So his special strategy at this point is to try to make us rely unduly upon our feelings and sensations and sensibilities. He persuades many people to base the whole of their Christian position upon them. They had some wonderful feelings in the presence of God in prayer, or in a service, or elsewhere; and they have been relying upon them. Then, for some reason or another, their feelings seem to desert them. They are aware of a dryness and a coldness; they do not feel any longer what they used to feel; and their whole position is shaken. The devil suggests to them that they are not Christians at

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 9-10

<sup>18</sup> Ebenezer Erskine, *Works*, 3:421

<sup>19</sup> Hymn 582

all, that they have never been Christians. The only remedy is 'the breastplate of righteousness.' While we are to enjoy feelings, they are to be subservient to, and the outcome of, our standing on the basis of justification by faith only. It is 'the righteousness of Jesus Christ by faith' that saves me, not any feelings we may have with respect to it.<sup>20</sup>

(3) The breastplate protects us from fearfulness. Our breastplate provides a sense of boldness and renewed strength. For example, think of a soldier entering into battle with some indestructible metal formed into a large breastplate. For the sake of illustration, let's say this breastplate covers him completely from head to foot, front and back. "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb.4:15-16). "Thy works, not mine, O Christ, speak gladness to this heart; they tell me all is done; they bid my fear depart" (Horatius Bonar).<sup>21</sup> "The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion" (Prov.28:1).

(4) The breastplate protects us from haughtiness. If Satan is unable to keep us depressed or fearful, he tempts us with pride and arrogance. The breastplate of righteousness removes all possibility of boasting. "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, 'He who boasts, let him boast in the LORD'" (1Cor.1:30-31). "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil.3:8-9).

Pride is fundamental in fallen human nature, and the result is that, even when we come into the Christian life, and have seen initially how utterly wrong we have been, and how our own 'goodness' avails nothing, and how we have to rely in utter simplicity and helplessness upon Christ and His perfect work for us – I say, even when we have entered the Christian life the devil may still trap us. He tries to bring us back into a subtle reliance once more upon works, and upon ourselves, and upon our own activities. We are living the Christian life, we are active, and working hard, and making a great contribution; and in a subtle way we begin to be proud of it, and to rely upon it, and feel that after all we are as we are because of all the good we have done since we became Christians. We begin to imagine ourselves to be perfect Christians! Without knowing it we have come to rely upon our own activities and actions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians*, 7:234-235

<sup>21</sup> Hymn 441

<sup>22</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians*, 7:238-239