

## The Fight of Faith: Our Battle

Ephesians 6:13-17

*Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, - Ephesians 6:13-17, ESV*

### Introduction: Standing our Ground

Last week, we saw, in verse 11, that the purpose for putting on the whole armor of God is so that we can stand against the schemes of the devil. Verses 13-14, which begin this week's verses, bring back the idea of standing, as Paul tells us three times in two verses that we need to stand: "*Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth.*" In the original Greek, the verb "stand" or "withstand" occurs three times in the space of seven words.

So, just how important is it that we stand our ground? It's important enough for the Apostle Paul to tell us in four times in four verses to stand, including the last three times in quick succession.

But how important is standing your ground? Is Paul's emphasis warranted? Well, standing your ground is important enough that it may have made the difference in the outcome of the Civil War. Late in the afternoon of July 2, 1863, Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and his 20th Maine Regiment stood their ground against a fierce Confederate onslaught and, by holding Little Round Top, ensured that the Union would win the Battle of Gettysburg.

Union troops had only secured Little Round Top minutes before the Confederates started attacking, but because the Union was able to stand their ground, the Confederate troops were forced to retreat and regroup before trying a final, desperate assault on the main Union force in what has become known as Pickett's Charge on July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

But the battle was really decided the day before. If the Confederates had taken Little Round Top, they would have decimated the Union army and won the day. A major Confederate victory in the heart of Union territory would likely have changed the outcome of the whole war.

So how important is standing our ground? It's what we're called to do. We need the whole armor of God to do it. And it means the difference between success and failure.

## **I. What We Put On (Our Clothing)**

In order for us to stand, we're told that we need the whole armor of God. Paul lays out six pieces of our armor, three that we wear and three that we take up. Each of these six pieces is vitally important, as each of them reflects a vital aspect of the attributes of God as found in the character of Christ. Paul is very emphatic that we cannot neglect any of these six.

### **A. Belt of Truth**

The very first piece of equipment we need is the belt of truth: "*Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth.*" The clause could be more literally translated as "having girded your loins with truth," or – since no one says girded loins anymore – having tied truth around your waist.

This probably refers to a preparatory action that Roman soldiers would take prior to entering battle: They would take their long robe or tunic and bind it up under their wide leather belt, making it shorter (knee-length instead of ankle-length) and thus easier for maneuvering in battle.

So, Paul is saying that we need to take the truth and tie it around us, holding our clothing together, if we're going to be ready for battle. The truth is found in God's word and in the main subject and focus of God's word, in the Lord Jesus. Both God's written word, the Bible, and God's incarnate word, the Lord Jesus, are referred to in Scripture as "the truth." But the truth by itself does us no good until we apprehend it, tying it around us, holding all together.

We live in a day and age when truth is mocked, ridiculed, personalized and rendered irrelevant for real life. Truth is "your truth" or "my truth" and usually equates to whatever story we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better and be able to sleep at night. No one's truth is said to be better or worse than anyone else's truth, unless of course, your truth includes the idea that your truth is the truth, in which case your truth is wrong. Exclusivity must be excluded and only inclusivity and tolerance will be tolerated.

But if there is a God, then when God speaks, His perspective is the true one. If Jesus is the Son of God and the truth incarnate, that is not something which I just personally believe. Jesus did not claim to be the truth just for those who believe Him to be the truth, He claimed to be the truth, absolute and unchanging – the same yesterday, today and forever. Only when we apprehend that truth – the absolute and personal truth that is incarnate in the Lord Jesus – and hold everything together with the truth will we be able to stand.

When we do apprehend the truth in this very real and personal way, we will be ready to put on the rest of the armor and be prepared for battle. Without truth, objective and real and absolute and yet personally apprehended, nothing else will hold together. Concepts like righteousness, peace, faith and salvation have no real meaning unless they are rooted in and reference the truth of God. So, the first thing we need is the truth.

How do we apprehend the truth? We study and we believe. We know, understand, affirm and adopt the truth of God's word in everything, particularly what it reveals to us about Christ. At a pastor's conference earlier this week, I learned that Christian publishers are very hesitant to publish books of doctrine, because they don't sell well. And apparently, among doctrinal books that don't sell well, books about the person and work of Christ sell the least. You can get Christians to buy books on eschatology, the doctrine of end times, or even on the doctrine of the church or of creation, but not Christ.

If Christians do not want to give themselves to the study of Christ's person and work, how can we bind the truth of Christ around our waist and be ready for battle? It's no wonder we're so ill-equipped for the Fight of Faith. Christians want practical teaching on marriage, parenting, discerning the will of God for your life, finding peace, being successful and more, but if you don't start with a clear understanding and adoption of the truth about Christ, how can you expect to have any of those other things? If you don't truly have Christ, or don't understand what it means to have Christ, then how can you expect His benefits?

## **B. Breastplate of Righteousness**

The next piece of armor is the only one we're explicitly told that we "put on" - *having put on the breastplate of righteousness* - as in "put on the whole armor of God" and "put on the new self" and elsewhere in Paul, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and simply "put on Christ." This verb "put on" could be applied to our belt, shoes or helmet, but Paul doesn't use it with those pieces, just of the breastplate of righteousness.

For the Roman soldier, the breastplate was a thick piece of leather, perhaps lined with metal, which would extend from his neck to his belt, which helped hold it in place. It guarded his heart and his most vital organs from the arrows and sword or dagger attacks of the enemy.

The reason why Paul tells us to "put on" righteousness as a breastplate is that the only righteousness we have is the righteousness of Christ. Much discussion arises over whether this breastplate of righteousness refers to the righteousness of justification, by which are declared righteous, or the righteousness of sanctification, by which we are progressively being made righteous.

Let me clarify: Christians are declared “not guilty” by God, not on the basis of any righteousness we have in and of ourselves. It is not our own internal righteousness that is the basis for our salvation, our acceptance and adoption by God. But sanctification is a process, whereby we are progressively made to be righteous, as we die to sin and live to God.

So, which righteousness is this breastplate, the righteousness given to us as the basis for our justification or the righteousness which God is working into our lives in the ongoing process of sanctification? The answer should be obvious: Yes! In other words, this is a false distinction, because these are not two different kinds of righteousness. There is only one true righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus. Paul tells us to “put on” the breastplate of righteousness because our righteousness is Jesus, in justification and in sanctification. In fact, putting on the righteousness of Christ is a way of describing the process of sanctification.

The only righteousness which is perfect, impenetrable and invulnerable to Satan’s attacks is the perfect, complete righteousness of Christ. We must avoid the common error of thinking that God has given us the perfect righteousness of Christ in our justification so that we can copy it in making our own righteousness in sanctification. God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ in justification and we put it on in sanctification.

In other words, we live outwardly in our lives the perfect character and obedience of Christ which has been given to us. It is Christ in us which is the hope of glory and Christ covering us which is the hope of protection from the attacks of the enemy. When the enemy strikes at our vitals, it is not our own record of law-keeping and obedience which helps us, but it is Christ’s perfection, given to us and truly made ours.

Does that mean that we don’t obey God? No! How can we desire anything but to obey God if we’re putting on the righteousness of Christ? But any obedience in our lives cannot begin until we confess our helplessness to obey and please God and our total need for Christ to be our righteousness in everything. That’s why we must put Him on!

### **C. Shoes of the Readiness of the Gospel of Peace**

The next piece of armor goes on our feet – “*and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.*” Now in English, we have the words “put on” again, but a more rigidly literal translation would be “having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” But like “gird your loins,” no one talks about shodding your feet these days. You don’t ask someone, “How are you going to shod your feet for church today?”

So, what do we put on our feet? Preparation or readiness that comes from or belongs to the Gospel of peace. What does the Gospel of peace prepare us to do and how does it prepare us

to do it? Well, while the overall call in this passage is to stand our ground, our footwear is one of two pieces of our armor which have offensive as well as defensive capability.

Roman soldiers wore leather boots which had a very thick sole studded with short, hollow nails, hobnails. These made their shoes kind of the equivalent of our modern-day athletic cleats. So, when a football player, like an offensive lineman, puts on his cleats, do they help him stand his ground or advance against his opponent? Both!

The Gospel functions in the same way: When the enemy comes against us with force, the Gospel of peace reminds us of our standing with God and keeps us from losing our footing and getting trampled in the battle. Thus, the Gospel prepares us to stand our ground. But also, when we go on the offensive, it is the Gospel of peace which proclaims peace and reconciliation to those held in the bondage of sin, thus allowing us to effectively advance God's kingdom of light against the darkness.

Either way, if we're going to stand in the battle, we need the preparation that comes only from the Gospel of peace. What is the Gospel of peace? It is the good news that God reigns over sin and death and He has made peace with us by the death and resurrection of His Son. Jesus took our sin upon Himself on the cross and gives us His perfect righteousness instead. By taking away our sin and giving us His righteousness, Jesus cancels the record of wrongs against us and gives us a perfect righteousness, that give us peace with God.

## **II. What We Take Up (Battle Gear)**

Those first three items are all things we need to wear, that we need to have in place first and foremost, before the battle. We need the truth of God apprehended for our lives, the righteousness of Christ covering us and the Gospel of peace preparing us to have solid footing in the battle, whether standing our ground or gaining ground.

Now, we're ready to take up the next three items . . .

### **A. Shield of Faith**

The first thing we "take up" is the shield of faith: "*In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one . . .*"

This shield is the full-size, body-covering shield the Roman foot soldier would take into battle. It was almost the size of a door and was made of wood, covered with animal skins, which would often be soaked in water to extinguish the flaming arrows of the enemy.

Faith is trusting in God's character and promises absolutely, even when we can't see clearly. The shield of the Roman was used when he could not see the enemy. If you can see, then you're not covered by your shield. Thus, we walk by faith and not by sight. We trust God – His wisdom, power and goodness – and we trust His promises – which are all “Yes” in Christ. This is the only way to extinguish the flaming arrows – the attacks, accusations, temptations and deceptive doubts of the enemy.

### **B. Helmet of Salvation**

Next we “*take the helmet of salvation.*” This is probably a reference to our eternally secure salvation in Christ, the sure knowledge of which helps us “keep our head” in the battle. It could also be a reference to the fact that we know, in the heat of battle, that “salvation” in every sense, belongs to the Lord.

The kind of confidence in the battle that comes from salvation reminds me of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who faced the fiery furnace and were able to tell King Nebuchadnezzar, “*O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*” (Daniel 3:16-18, ESV)

Knowing that God is our Savior – in life and in death and through death into life – is key to keeping our thinking straight, clear and bold in the midst of battle. Sometimes God will deliver us from death, as He did for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. At other times, He will deliver us through death. But because we know He has delivered us from death forever, we never need to be afraid. Fear makes us lose our mind in battle, but the helmet of salvation allows us to keep it.

### **C. Sword of the Spirit**

The last piece of armor is vitally important for striking back at the enemy, “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*” The Bible uses the phrase “word of God” in two ways, to refer to the Scriptures and to the Son of God. These are the word of God inscribed and the word of God incarnate. If this sounds familiar already, it should: This is the same two things that “truth” refers to.

In John 17, Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth.” Was He asking God to sanctify us through the Scriptures or through Himself as the word of God who is the truth of God? Yes! We are sanctified by Jesus, but we know Jesus and learn of Him and grow in Him through the Scriptures.

So, we need to know the Scriptures. Specifically, we need to read the Bible, study the Bible, understand the Bible, memorize the Bible, believe in the Bible and apply the Bible. But we need to do so while seeing Christ in all of Scripture and seeking Christ in all of Scripture. Ultimately, it is Jesus that we need.

When we see Jesus in glory in Revelation, both at the beginning of the book in Chapter 1, when He is walking in the midst of His church, and at the end of the book in Chapter 19, when He is coming in glory, He has a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of His mouth, which is the word of God. And in Hebrews 4:12-13, we read:

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (ESV)*

We need this glorious King, who wields this sword, which comes from His mouth, to first lay bare the thoughts and intentions of our own hearts and then to do battle against our enemy. Without the sword of the Spirit, the best we can hope to do is to hide from the enemy. With it, we strike back with God’s own weapon and strike him down.

### **Conclusion: Taking Our Stand Together**

I need to say one final thing as we close. Throughout this section, Paul has been using plural language. He is not addressing individual Christians, but Christians together in community in the church. Roman soldiers always took their stand against the enemy together. Their shields were designed to cover them best when locked together in a wall of protection. They could swing their swords most effectively when they knew the man on their right had protection covering their vulnerable side. When they stood together and moved as one, they were unstoppable.

Warfare is not a solitary business. We must take our stand together. This means two things: I need the person next to me and he needs me. I can’t neglect some aspect of my armor, because if I go down, I expose those around me to attack and harm. But neither can I just put on my own armor and go off and do my own thing. A solitary soldier, even well armed, is relatively easy prey for the enemy. Jesus calls us to stand in Him and to stand together in Him!