

Drawing Upon God's Strength By Holly Aastuen
August 23, 2009 Ephesians 6:10-20

Put on the whole armor of God.

As much as I try to ignore that phrase in today's scripture, it keeps jumping out at me—put on the whole armor of God. It's an odd image for me not only because armor isn't something I think about every day or even every week. It's an odd image because my mind has trouble imagining Christians ever wearing armor. In my mind's eye, first century Christians only wear flowing off-white robes and to imagine those people putting on armor—it's sort of like the biblical story of King David as a boy being encouraged to put on armor to fight Goliath. It just doesn't fit.

But Paul isn't writing to the people of Ephesus about going to a literal war, he's talking to them about spiritual war. He's talking to them about hanging onto their faith, not because it feels good, but because the Christians of Ephesus were being marginalized as a result of their newfound faith. The Ephesians were scorning their Christian sisters and brothers and Paul wanted them to be sure to be equipped to stand up to such scorn and derision. The moral high ground would be their defense.

And so Paul encourages them to put on (using armor language) truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation. Notice that Paul prefaces this by saying 'Put on the **whole** armor of God.' Not just one piece, but all of it. Just as it would be foolish to go into battle with just a helmet and no breastplate or a sword and no shield, all of these elements of the Christian faith: truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation are commended to the Ephesians as useful tools.

And all of these tools are defensive, used to help the people have a thick skin to guard them against their neighbors' derision and scorn. It's easy to buckle under pressure from others and, especially in the case of the Ephesians, go back to their old ways so as to blend in with their neighbors. Paul gives them the tools from their faith to stand firm.

Even the sword of the spirit is meant to be a defensive tool.

Let me say a word about the sword. Let me ask you a question: Did any of you engage in sword practice when you were in Sunday School?

For me, sword practice is a very distant memory, but what I do remember is how the exercise went: We'd sit at our Sunday School table in our classroom and hold our Bibles like this (demonstrate holding Bible head high, pointing the binding away from the face as if this book were a literal sword). Then the teacher would say a verse from scripture—'Ephesians 6:10'—and we'd all frantically page through our bibles until someone shouted out "I've got it!" then we'd all wait until everyone got to the page and then the 'winner' would read the verse.

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Then we'd close our Bibles, hold them like swords and wait for the next Bible verse to be called out.

What I got out of that exercise was the importance of knowing the books of the Bible so that when a book was called out, I knew exactly where to look for it. What I think the teacher was trying to get us to learn was that digging into the Bible was fun and the point of the game was to get us to eagerly look up and read passages from the Bible.

Sunday School exercises aside, the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, is a helpful tool to have. How many of you have ever memorized a Bible verse? How many of you have memorized more than 5 Bible verses?

If you have, good for you, because that is the Bible you carry with you at all times. Those stories and those verses are tools you can rely upon in good times and bad.

Jesus was well versed in the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. He used it in various settings, showing not only his knowledge of the Bible, but also his understanding of how his life was a fulfillment of Hebrew Scriptures. He also used it as a defensive tool when attacked by the devil. In Luke 4 as he is in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, Jesus uses scripture (from Deuteronomy) to defend against every single temptation.

To the temptation of turning stones into bread, Jesus replied, "It is written, that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God."

To the temptation of ruling the kingdoms of the world, Jesus answered with another quote from the Bible, "You shall worship only God and only God shall you serve."

And finally to the temptation of proving his divinity by jumping off the tallest spire, Jesus responded, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God."

Jesus used the sword of the spirit, a part of the armor of God as a tool to help him defend himself against the temptations of the devil.

Though we don't often find ourselves dealing with such visible manifestations of evil, we would be wise to not neglect our spiritual strengthening. We never know when we might need it.

Orelander Love had never met a Christian, at least not one whom he knew really followed Christ until he met Ms. Jeanette Aldred. She was 88 when they met while Orelander was robbing her house. He thought the house was empty, but when he found Ms. Aldred in her bed, he panicked and started hitting her. Orelander gives a description of the scene in his own words: '[She] did what

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Jesus did under the worst circumstance, under the threat of her life and limb. She said to me, "Jesus loves you. I forgive you. God bless you." She said these things even as I beat her...robbed and cursed her. She did not deserve it, but she did as Christ did.'

In days following, Mr. Love continued to rob houses, but he was haunted by the words of the woman who forgave him even as he hurt her. He was finally arrested and when the police questioned him about other burglaries, they mentioned Jeanette Aldred's name. He began to cry. He confessed to the crime and wanted more than anything else to speak to her family. He was never able to see her again personally, but his life has not been the same since their encounter. Orelander Love has been a Christian now for six years. In a letter composed after Jeanette's death at age 95, he wrote, 'I do not now care about the years I will spend in prison or the media or the church screaming for vengeance. It was God with the rod that I feared. Ms. Aldred wanted no vengeance. She wanted me saved. Well, I have been saved...I praise God to every inmate who will hear. I thank God for Ms. Aldred.'" (*Peace and War*, p. 67 baylor.edu/christianethics/).

I've heard stories of people gaining strength from their faith during times of trial. I remember especially when some of the Christians who were held hostage in Iran many years ago, they used the scripture and prayers they had memorized to help them get through the long, tedious days as well as those horrifying moments when they thought they would be killed.

But most of us won't face such dire tests of our faith. Yet we still need our strength to get through the day.

My experience with evil is that it is usually shown with a pleasant and benign face. It comes in the form of seemingly simple temptations that draw me away from the core values of truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation, that draw me away from God.

The temptation to tone down my Christianity is a big temptation in my life.

I meet with a group of pastors every week at the Dunn Brothers in Eden Prairie. I don't pay much attention to the people who are working there, but I have sorted out over the years who is the boss and who are the employees. One day, one of the pastors asked us, "Have you met the owner of this place?" We all nodded, since at one time or another over the last five years we've been greeted or served by her.

Then came the next question: "What is her name?" No one knew.

Then he asked, "Does she know who we are and what sort of group her coffee house is hosting every week?" Again, we were silent.

"I spoke to her today," the pastor continued, "and I told her that we were a group of pastors who discuss the scripture for the coming Sunday. She told me she had no idea who we were and asked if any of the pastors were local. So I told her about Mike here and what a great church Eden Prairie United Methodist Church is."

I started to wonder why I had never volunteered that information to the owner of the place where we were meeting so regularly. I'm not a big fan of broadcasting who I am or what I believe, but there is no reason to be so shy about our faith that no one would ever mistake us as Christian.

We need to tell the truth about who we are, to not be ashamed of the gospel.

We could go down the list of Paul's pieces of armor—after the belt of truth comes the breastplate of righteousness. Do we have right relationships with ourselves, our family, our friends, our God? Do we honor all those who depend upon us for friendship and truth telling?

Next comes the foot protectors of peace—are we at peace with ourselves and our neighbors? Do we resist the temptation to think ill of those around us? Do we take the time to work through legitimate conflicts and act as a peacemaker in these situations?

The shield of faith is a daily struggle for me. I am often very self-reliant and don't think I have the time or the need to rely on God. At my best moments, I am full of faith, seeking God's guidance in every major area of my life. But at my worst moments I'm putting my nose to the grindstone and muscling through life on my own.

Next is mentioned the helmet of salvation which is a gift from God we've all been given. Jesus came to save the world and bring us all back into relationship with God. We don't have to worry about making sure it happened. We've all been saved.

And finally praying in the Spirit—this is not a specific piece of armor, but Paul mentions it at the end of this passage, saying pray for yourselves and pray for me that I may be bold in proclaiming the gospel.

Though we may not face battles that seem to warrant armor, we do struggle with battles every day. Every day we are pulled in directions that are not healthy for our spirit, that are not nurturing to our relationship with God.

In order to put on that proverbial armor we need to attend to our souls through meditation, study and prayer that bring us closer to the strength of God.

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In my reading for this sermon, I came upon a sermon by Ed Markquart, a sermon written when he was a pastor in Seattle. In the conclusion of the sermon he shared that he loves his mother's morning prayer which he recites every morning. Using his mother's words, let us bow in prayer:

"O God, this morning I come into the stillness of your presence to begin this day with you, so that out of this moment, I may take with me a quiet serenity and strength to last me all day long. I have come to find wisdom, so I do not make any foolish mistakes. I have come to find peace, so that nothing would worry or upset me all through today. I have come to find love so that nothing would make me bitter, unforgiving or unkind. I have come to find justice, so that I would always work for the poor and disadvantaged in the world. I have come to begin this day with you, continue it with you, and end it with you, so that this would be a day which has nothing to regret. Hear this morning prayer, for Jesus' sake. Amen."