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Take Up Arms *Ephesians 6:10-20*

When I was about 13 years old I discovered Star Wars. My brother brought home some bootleg VHS copies of the original three films, and I must have watched them at least 10 times each before I was 15. I will admit I'm still a pretty big fan of the franchise even now, but by all accounts so are many of you. Star Wars is arguably the biggest grossing movie franchise in history. What is it that captivates audiences around the world? Certainly it's the characters, the imaginative setting, but I think there's something more elemental that keeps people coming back. It's the clear cut way the movie presents a war between good and evil. Here we have good and evil writ large, the scrappy underdogs winning over the seemingly overwhelming forces of evil. And we eat that stuff up. And yet we walk out of the movie theater or turn off our TV and go back into our normal lives, and we don't imagine that there could really be a war going on between forces of evil and good. And we especially don't believe that we are in the middle of that war.

Last week Pastor Mark shared about what we learn from Jesus in demonic encounters, and the authority we have from Jesus were we to find ourselves in that kind of encounter. But the truth is that many of us will not have that kind of a demonic encounter. But... all of us will encounter the work and the realm of Satan in our lives. All of us. How is that?

You'll remember that we began this series with the words of Ephesians 6:12, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* Paul describes here a war of cosmic proportions, two kingdoms at war; a kingdom of darkness and a kingdom of light. We see the effects of these kingdoms day in and day out. When I go down to the homeless shelter and see men and women ensnared in abuse and addiction, trapped in lies, I witness the work and realm of Satan in action. When I see people leave the church because of a lie they believed about the church, I witness a casualty of spiritual warfare in this cosmic war. Conversely, when I see people get freed from sin and addiction at Celebrate Recovery, I witness the kingdom of God at work.

For many of us in the church, we have made salvation about Jesus versus sin, but Paul reminds us here that it is not only that. It is Jesus versus sin, evil, darkness, and the devil. Remember the Latin phrase Pastor Mark taught us about Jesus victorious? *Christus Victor!* Jesus is ultimately victorious over the forces of darkness. The war is over, but battles are still being fought.

But don't just imagine that Satan is out to wreak havoc (though he is), Satan has a very specific goal in mind: to keep souls out of the kingdom of God and in his kingdom. Remember, one of Satan's names means "splitter," he aims to keep us split apart from God. So when we hear Pastor Mark tell us that someone stole his identity and that this was the work of Satan, Satan's goal in that was not to merely steal Mark's identity, it was to cause Mark fear, anger, doubt, and despair to draw Mark away from God. That is what's at stake in this cosmic battle: souls.

I begin here because it doesn't make much sense to talk about spiritual armor without reiterating that we're in a spiritual war and what's at stake in that war. It is a matter of what your worldview is. Do you see yourself as being part of a cosmic battle between good and evil? Well you are. The next few weeks we will continue to talk about that war. This week we will talk about the armor we wear—taking up arms. Next week, we will talk about recon, discerning Satan's activities and what gives him a foothold in our lives. And finally, we'll talk about a battle plan, resisting Satan so that he flees.

If we are at war, a spiritual war, how do you prepare for battle? With spiritual armor, obviously. In Ephesians, Paul gives us this incredibly vivid imagery of how we prepare ourselves for this spiritual war.

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 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, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." Eph. 6:10-20

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul tells us to put on the "armor of God." But notice that phrase; it's God's armor. It was his armor before it was ours! In fact, Ephesians isn't the first place this armor is mentioned. In Isaiah 59:15b-17a it says, *"The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head..."* Here in Isaiah, God straps on his armor to fight injustice. Now that armor is ours too. Too often I hear the armor of God being used like some sort of magical incantation, as if reciting them actually puts them on. Or I hear people focusing on the metaphor more than what it represents. This isn't helpful! We miss out on what

God has for us when we treat it like that. Paul is actually talking about a way of life, of living into the things that God has given us in such a way that in so living we fight back against the forces of evil. That's why Paul says, "Stand!" so often. He's saying, hold fast! Maintain these practices, these beliefs, this way of life that fights against Satan.

Without further ado, let's look at the armor of God, his armor that he has given us to wear.

First, the belt of truth. The original language here literally means gird your loins with truth! That term has actually made it as an idiom in common usage in the English language, and it comes from the King James Bible. It means, prepare yourself! Prepare yourself with truth. The Bible says that Satan is the "Father of Lies," and indeed we see this in the Bible from the beginning. Just read Genesis 3 and see how the serpent so cleverly, and deceptively, twists words so that Eve believes a lie and eats the fruit. This is why it's so important to be careful students of Scripture. We must prepare ourselves against the lies of Satan by knowing well what God says about himself and about how to live with him. In the Roman suit of armor, the girdle was the first piece of armor put on, and it helped support the other pieces of armor. If we do not begin with truth, how do we know about righteousness? About the gospel of peace? Gird your loins!

Next goes on the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness literally means "justice," which means a way of right-living. Doing what is right before God. Satan can use the way we live our lives against us. If you are lacking integrity in some matter, Satan will find some way to bring you down with that. Honestly, of all the pieces of armor, this one seems to need the least amount of explanation. Live a life of right-standing, that imitates Jesus, and you will provide no room for the devil to get to your heart.

The shoes of the gospel of peace. Roman soldiers had sandals that they would drive nails through the bottom of to help give them grip, kind of like an ancient pair of cleats. It was intended to give the soldiers a secure footing, but it was also to help them be able to take the offensive. Imagine a soldier standing his ground, but needing to be ready to take the offensive. They need their feet to grip so they don't slip once they begin running. Paul calls these shoes "shoes of the gospel of peace." "Gospel" is good news. The good news of Jesus keeps you secured on your feet, but it is also what keeps you from slipping as you move forward.

As a follower of Jesus, have you ever asked what your purpose is? In other words, have you ever asked what the point of your faith was? Did you just receive the good news for your own edification, or is there something more too it? Too many believers don't put on their shoes of the gospel of peace, they don't have this readiness that carries them forward, that gives them purpose and motivation. Put on your shoes!

We are called to take up the shield of faith in all circumstances. The shields Roman soldiers used would have been large enough to cover most of their body. And they could be soaked in water to put out flaming arrows that would lodge in them. In the warfare of those days, armies shot arrows dipped in pitch and set on fire in order to scatter the ranks. Even if you had a

shield, you might be tempted to throw it down because it was on fire, which would leave you vulnerable of course.

The metaphor this applies to is faith. Satan would like us to discard our faith, to scatter our ranks with doubt. Faith, by the way, refers not just to belief in God but belief in who God is. Actually, I'd say that's primarily what faith is about: *who God is*. I recently had a confirmation student ask me some very specific questions about how one could defend the ages of the patriarchs in Genesis. For example, Methuselah being 969 years old. He wanted to know how he could defend that to his atheist friends. I gave him some answers, but I told him that it would be better if he could turn the discussion back to Jesus because ultimately, that was the biggest question his atheist friends need to deal with. What I didn't say to my confirmation friend, and I wish I had, was that his faith doesn't stand or fall on what the Bible says about how old Methuselah really was. It stands or falls based on what the Bible says about who God is, in Jesus Christ. Our faith finds its focal point in Jesus Christ, and who Jesus reveals God to be, and everything that distracts itself from him is from the devil. "Jesus loves me, this I know," is the simple song of faith. And it's that simplest faith that Satan would love for us drop ahold of.

The helmet of salvation. In the Isaiah passage I read earlier, it says that God has a helmet of salvation. But remember that God doesn't need salvation; he's the one doing the saving! So in that sense, when God wears the helmet of salvation it is a symbol of victory. The helmet of salvation can mean victory for us too. Earlier in Ephesians, in chapter 2:8, Paul says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,*" Notice that we "have been saved," it's already done. So it's a gift, given to us.

Now think of it this way. How often do you look around at the world, or even at your own life, and wonder if evil has already won? When you look at racism, poverty, conflict or even too look at one's own life and see addiction, anger, pride, it can seem like a lost cause. And wouldn't Satan want us to give up on salvation, of all kind? But God hands us this helmet of salvation to remind us that while the battles are still being fought, the war is done. Evil loses, good wins. That's the helmet of salvation.

The sword of the Spirit. There's two really interesting facets of this panoply of armor. One is that there's no armor to protect the back. We're always meant to face our foes! The other is that this is the only offensive part of the armor. The most obvious way to understand this metaphor is that Scripture, the Word of God, is how we can strike back at Satan. Just look at Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness. The only words he says to Satan there were "Begone Satan." Every other word to Satan was from the book of Deuteronomy. For us, it's yet another encouragement to be studying and memorizing Scripture. It's why we keep replaying the same passage week by week, 1 John 4:4, "*He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world.*" Learn that passage, and more! I'm terrible at memorizing, but that doesn't stop me from continuing to try. And you should too.

But there's more to the Sword of the Spirit than just memorizing Scripture. The original language here uses the phrase "rhema theos" when we would expect "logon theos" for Word of God. Rhema can mean "word" but it more often means "utterance," or "spoken word" so

literally Paul is saying here “the sword of the Spirit, which is the utterance of God.” In other words, this is not just Scripture, but Scripture spoken, Scripture proclaimed. When we speak the truth and power of Scripture into our contexts, we are fighting back the forces of evil with words of truth and salvation. This is not just about ad hoc encounters we have with demons, but about the conquest of Satan’s powers through the proclamation of the Gospel. A way of life and speech that proclaims truth, love, and peace into our world and demolishes lies, hatred, and turmoil.

You may think the armor of God ends there, but it doesn’t! Notice that the end of verse 17 is not a period, but a comma. *“The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God COMMA.”* So what is this final activity of spiritual warfare Paul wants us to take up? Prayer! Notice the emphasis here, that he tells us to pray ALL the time, with ALL prayer, with ALL perseverance, for ALL the saints. That’s quite a bit of ALL. In fact, Paul spends more time talking about prayer than any of the parts of armor in this passage. It’s foundational for him!

Notice what he asks them to pray for: that he may have words to speak and proclaim the mystery of the Gospel. What part of God’s armor is involved with speaking? The Sword of the Spirit, the “utterance” of God! Paul is asking them to pray that he would yield his “sword” well!

The whole armor of God is an image of a well-armed saint. This is someone who is held up by truth, who lives in right-standing, who walks securely forward with the good news of peace, who holds onto their faith in who God is, who wears salvation as their victory, who speaks God’s word, and most importantly, one who prays.

As Paul asked the saints in Ephesus to pray that he would wield his sword well, we can pray this for ourselves too. In fact, it’s a great idea to pray the entire armor of God over ourselves and those we know. Not in a rote way, as though it were a magical incantation. But in an imaginative and reflective way that understands what God has given us in this armor. Listen along and pray with me as I use these pieces of armor to guide our prayer.

Father, we recognize we are in a spiritual battle, that there are forces of evil at work in this world that would seek to turn us and many others away from you. Give us your strength, give us your power, to fight those forces of darkness. Father, help us to ready ourselves by knowing your truth. Thank you that whatever else is uncertain in this world, I can rely on the truth of Jesus to gird myself. Father, help us to wear your righteousness and to live in it day by day. Help us to live rightly, so that Satan may not have a foothold in my life. Move our feet with the compassion of your good news. Give us opportunities today to share your peace with those we encounter in turmoil, through our deeds and through our words. Father, we know that Satan seeks to break our ranks with confusion and doubt, but help us to stand and extinguish every flaming arrow, remind ourselves that you are good, that you are love, that you are just. Thank you that your salvation is ours and that we are victorious in you. We wear your salvation like a helmet. Help us to wield the sword of your Word today, speaking in the power of your Scripture that demolishes evil and darkness in our world through the proclamation of your good news. Help us to be vigilant in our prayers, ever reliant on you, ever watchful for our brothers and sisters. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.