

Ephesians 6:10-20
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5, 2021

Are you ready to fight? That question may catch you by surprise. Isn't church a place we come to hear of God's love for everyone? It's a place for calmness and spiritual rest. Christians are peacemakers. Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek when someone strikes us. Yet we are engaged in a battle whether we like it or not. It is important for us to participate in this struggle and to win. So we urge

JOIN THE BATTLE

St. Paul provides the strategy:

- I. Know the enemy
- II. Use God's armor
- III. Pray

When facing a battle it is vital to know the enemy. The leader of the opposition forces is the devil. We know his background, how God created him as an angel early in history. As such he is a powerful, superhuman being. However, he rebelled against God and his authority and was defeated by the Lord. He remains dedicated to the single-minded purpose of opposing God's people, trying to draw us into sin and away from faith.

The text accurately called his methods schemes. He is tricky and deceptive. His words are filled with lies as he strives to make sin attractive to us. "Have some fun. Here's how to experience life to the fullest." He knows what appeals to human nature. What's your weakness? He will exploit it. His behavior at times may seem repetitious but it works, although he may also change directions. For example, maybe pride is a problem that he has succeeded in planting in your ego. If God sends something to humble you, Satan may then try to beat you down into despair and despondency.

As if he isn't a big enough problem on his own, the devil has an array of helpers. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." There were additional angels who joined the rebellion against God and shared in the defeat that Satan met. These evil angels, whom we often refer to as demons or evil spirits, exert influence in this dark world which is covered with sin, opposed to God, who is light, and to us as children of the light. In addition to those outside enemies, we also have a sinful nature within us that is an eager listener to temptation. So a mighty battle shapes up.

The attacks directed toward us are many. There is false teaching. Satan wants us to doubt God's Word. Remember how he challenged Eve, "Did God really say...?" and followed with direct contradiction of God's Word, "You will not surely die." He still comes up with people to serve as his mouthpieces to claim the Bible does not say what it plainly teaches or that it no longer fits our modern world. These false teachings may promote other ways of salvation, even if it seems something small like, "Make your decision for Christ." He wants us to allow other gods to be worshiped. He appeals to using our reason to stand over the Word and accept only what makes sense to us. He tries to get us to change the Bible's standards of morality. Or if we uphold scriptural truths, he fills us with pride as we put down those who are misled. He would like us to regard faith as something formal and external, not really impacting our daily lives and choices. He prods us into lovelessness toward our fellow believers and hatred toward unbelievers instead of evangelistic love, much like the polarization we see in our nation politically. Satan's attacks

come from all sides. Much is at stake in the battle: our very eternity. He wants us to follow the ways of evil and join him in hell forever. Fight those temptations. Join the battle against sin and Satan.

II.

As we venture forth we dare not rely on our own power or clever strategy or we will be lost. Use God's armor. The panoply or armor of God includes several pieces of defensive equipment. "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." More than the strap that holds up your britches, the soldier's belt was a wide piece of leather with more strips attached, perhaps even with some metal backing, that protected the midsection and thighs. He put it on first and attached to it the scabbard for his sword and the breastplate. It is the belt of truth. God's Word is the absolute, revealed truth, not only identifying the true God but also reporting his work for us to redeem us from sin and death. This message connects with all the rest of the armor.

"With the breastplate of righteousness in place." The breastplate covered the torso. The piece might even be specially molded for the person. Some rather important organs are inside the trunk of your body. You can survive a wound to your arms or legs but not to your heart. It is fatal. What's the spiritual component of our breastplate? Righteousness. Not our own, for that would be flimsy and riddled with gaping holes. Christ's righteousness covers us, and it is perfect, for he never violated a command of God. On the cross he removed our sins. This righteousness, which we have received through faith, provides us that status before God. We are freed from the accusations and charges that the devil likes to bring. It doesn't matter what he tries to say. Paul assured the Romans, "Who will bring any charge against those who God has chosen? It is God who justifies." You are protected with the breastplate of righteousness.

"With your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." Solid footing is important to stand your ground and to advance against the enemy. The soldier's sandals had good soles; some were even spiked. The gospel or good news of Jesus tells us we are at peace with God because he has forgiven our sins. We are thus eager to march with courage and steadfastness into battle. We rejoice in God's peace and are ready to share that peace with others.

"In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Two types of shields were used by the army. A smaller one could be moved as needed. The front line advanced behind tall shields about four feet high and 2½ feet wide, covering the area below the eyes to the knees. These shields were made of six layers of tough leather that protected like metal but were lighter. A group of soldiers armed with those shields presented a solid wall to the enemy. They could ward off sword and spear thrusts, javelins and arrows. The enemy might bombard with flaming arrows, tipped with cotton and pitch and set ablaze, causing a double danger as they could both pierce and burn. One source mentioned the shields might be soaked in water so the fire did not inflict damage. Faith is our shield. It renders us secure, fighting off doubt, depression, discouragement and fear. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

Soldiers can't hide completely behind the shield. They must see where they are going. So they wear a helmet to protect the head. Your head is important as it contains the brain which controls the rest of your body. Our helmet is salvation. With the certainty of our final deliverance to life

in heaven you and I are able to endure attacks. We can hold up our head with confidence and joy.

An offensive weapon is important for a soldier. We have a sword. The Roman army had both long and short swords. Mentioned here was the short sword. It was double-edged, able to cut both when thrusting out and when drawing back. With its forces thus armed the Romans conquered the world. They were a powerful force.

Regarding the sword of the Spirit, we are plainly told it is the word of God. It is even more powerful than the double-edged sword of the Roman soldier. Quoting the Word Jesus defeated Satan when tempted by him for forty days as he began his public ministry. Think of Joseph resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife by referring to God's will. David killed Goliath, not by trusting earthly armor but by relying on the Lord. The Christian's sword carries power because God's Word is the tool of the Spirit. We are not engaged in a fleshly battle but a spiritual one. The Word changes hearts, which is the way to true victory. You can enforce behavior with a club and man's might, but unless you win people's hearts, the likelihood of rebellion remains. The Spirit's sword of faith effects lasting change.

You may have noticed that the Word is involved in all the pieces of armor. It tells of the righteousness and peace we have in Jesus, it imparts faith, it assures us of salvation and it is the truth. This lesson from the Apostle Paul fits as we are set to resume several programs of Christian education. It is for all ages. Sunday School for our children, catechism classes for our youth, campus ministry for the university students, adult Bible classes on Sundays and Wednesdays all will happen in the coming days. Spiritual training is not limited to church groups. It occurs also in the home. We work together to equip God's people with his armor. Soldiers train extensively so their reactions in time of battle are instinctive. The same is needed for Christian soldiers. Know and learn the Word. Commit key portions to memory. Have it at your fingertips so you can stand when the day of evil comes, when the devil launches his attacks. Be ready always, wearing the armor of God and wielding the sword of the Spirit. Join the battle.

III.

Even with equipment doing battle is a dangerous activity. As you head to fight Satan, pray. Prayer is a wonderful privilege for God's children. Our right to approach God was won by Jesus, whose work produced our relationship with him and the right to talk to God as a dear child talks to his or her loving father. The Spirit is involved also. He aids our prayer life, intercedes for us, and presents the requests that we find difficulty in uttering. Prayer connects us with the power of God, which is unlimited and almighty and at work in our lives.

Our prayers include all the saints. We need our fellow soldiers working together for the battle to succeed. As an army we present a wall of defense and can watch in all directions, which is challenging to do alone. Paul included himself in the request for prayers. He was in prison awaiting trial as he penned this letter to the Ephesian congregation. In that setting he surely dealt with attacks from Satan that could easily produce fear and uncertainty. He would appear before high officials, even the emperor. He asked for boldness to speak the gospel and not just offer personal defense.

So what shall we pray for? Ask the Lord to lead you to use effectively the armor he provides. You don't want to stumble clumsily with it. Seek growth in understanding and reliance on the truths of his Word. Pray for boldness and strength of faith, so that you are not afraid, yielding or compromising its teachings or turning against it.

Our battle is not a competition where there is only one winner. We all can win with Christ. We want one another to win. Use the agencies that equip you with God's armor. Grow in the Word and in faith. We ask God to bless our Sunday School teachers, their students and families, leaders and participants in other groups of the congregation and our allies in each home as we fight for the faith. My prayer is not just that you join in the battle, but that you stand firm in God's truth when the day of evil comes, whenever Satan attacks. Following your Savior's leadership and using his armor, you will!