

Introduction to the Scripture:

All of Paul's letters to the early churches are structured similarly. In the first half, he reminds the church of what God did in giving us Jesus, and what his death and resurrection mean. The second half of the letter then answers the question, "So what does this mean for the church?" How are we to act and live, in light of Christ's death and resurrection?

Paul wrote the letter to the church in Ephesus while in prison (you'll hear a reference to him being "in chains" at the end of the passage). This passage includes what we typically call "the armor of God" which is an extended metaphor adapted to proclaim that believers have God's weaponry in our struggle against cosmic spiritual forces. Even though he uses a military metaphor, this is not a call to arms, but a call to stand firm in the faith.

SCRIPTURE - Ephesians 6:10-20:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For 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.

Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Sermon:

"Life is difficult!" It always has been and it always will be. And it seems that each generation makes new advances and progress in the effort to protect and guard against tragedy and trauma. Perhaps you've seen the nostalgic treatise which makes its way around social media poking fun at this. It goes like this:

Looking back, it's hard to believe that we have lived as long as we have. As children, we would ride in cars with no seat belts or air bags. Riding in the back of a pickup on a warm day was always a special treat. Our baby cribs were painted with bright-colored lead-based paint. We had no childproof lids on medicine bottles, doors, or cabinets, and when we rode our bikes, we had no helmets. We drank water from the garden hose and not from a bottle. We would spend hours building our go-karts out of scraps and then

ride down the hill, only to find out we forgot the brakes. After running into the bushes a few times, we learned to solve the problem. We would leave home in the morning and play all day, as long as we were back when the streetlights came on. And no one was able to reach us all day. We played dodgeball and sometimes the ball would really hurt. We ate cupcakes, bread and butter and drank soda, and the obesity rate was a third of what it is today; we were always outside playing. We had sports team tryouts and not everyone made the team. Those who didn't, learned to deal with disappointment.

That generation produced some of the greatest risk-takers and problem-solvers. We had freedom, failure, success, and responsibility, and learned how to deal with it all!

Now I'm not suggesting that many of these advances are unwise or frivolous – of course we should wear seatbelts and bike helmets. But you and I know that all of these safeguards do not necessarily keep tragedy away from our lives. For all our efforts to make our cars safer, for all the laws enacted to protect us on the road – the number one cause of accidental death for teenagers is still automobile accidents. Life is difficult.

While it seems we are on a never-ending quest for a long life of ease, the lesson learned at every turn will always be the same – stuff happens, life is difficult.

Jesus said it 2000 years ago and it will still be true 2000 years from now, "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

Paul has this in mind in our reading for today when he says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

Earlier in this letter he had described the wonder and privilege of what it means to be in relationship with Christ and now he encourages the church to live lives worthy of that call.

When he says, "Being strong in the Lord," that encouragement comes from an understanding that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. When we understand the nature of these blessings:

- the wonder of being predestined for adoption as children of God,
- the comfort of knowing Jesus as our friend and savior,
- the awe of being his workmanship,
- and the joy of belonging to his family,

...when we know in our minds and hearts that we are rooted and established in the promises of Christ, we have all we need to stand firm and be strong. And this confidence in him and in his promise makes us unshakable against the powers of evil in the world and in our lives.

And also, Christians have a unique set of armor as if preparing for battle, so that we are prepared for what the world has in store for us. Because, life is difficult.

As Paul was writing this letter he was under house arrest in Rome - a P.O.W. of his time. Night and day a soldier was there to ensure that he would not escape, and he may have even had a

Roman guard chained to him. Obviously, he was familiar with the armor of the day, and so he takes the armor that the typical Roman soldier wore, and translates it into Christian terms.

First is the **belt of truth**. The truth is what you can count on when everything around you spins out of control. Specifically, the truth here is what we know that is given by and found in God in Jesus Christ. When you put on THIS truth - that is, God's truth - all the other truths that the world would have you believe are shown to be untrue.

False truths such as: you are as important as the job you have, or your value is found in your bank account, and your beauty is determined by the latest fashions and products.

Rather, when you live by **God's** truth, you start from a place of being loved unconditionally simply by being alive. Your identity - who you really are - is beloved by God. We need to be protected from the evil of self-doubt and self-criticism which creep in so easily. And the belt of God's truth does this, by reminding us that we belong first to Him and not to the other voices / identities clamoring for space in our minds and hearts.

Next is the **breastplate of righteousness**. This is not our righteousness, our good deeds, but the righteousness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. When we clothe ourselves with God's righteousness we put on another way of life, defined and determined by God, and not by us.

When our hearts are clothed in righteousness, our decisions, both big and small, reflect God's influence in our lives, and our attitudes express a joy that cannot be explained. Here is where we find our purpose - our God-given purpose. Here is where we find the guidance we need to make choices which are pleasing to God.

Following Jesus, taking our cues from him are a way of putting on this righteousness. And when we are following Jesus, we find we are thinking of others more than ourselves. We make decisions that benefit the common good - and not just in the abstract, but which really make a difference in the peoples' lives who we come in contact with the most.

Next, we put on the **shoes of the gospel of peace**. One of the ways we do this is by not being ashamed of the gospel and allowing it to bring peace to others.

A number of years ago I took a group of senior high youth on a mission trip to the Mohawk Indians of upstate NY. We stayed on the reservation and much of our work was with the native people there. Some of the kids in our group were reluctant to identify themselves as Christian to the people we would meet, aware of the reputation that Christians have of historically oppressing and disrespecting the native people.

We encouraged the kids to see this as an opportunity to be Christians who will respect and care for them in genuine and life-giving ways. By not being ashamed of being Christian we were in a position to heal relationships and to build bridges of peace. We encouraged them to put on the shoes of the gospel of peace

Next is the **shield of faith**. There were two kinds of shields used by soldiers in Paul's time. One is a small round shield. The second is a full-length shield of leather-covered wood that protected the whole body. This is the shield Paul is speaking of here.

This shield of faith covers our entire person. And our faith does defend us from a variety of attacks – despair, grief, disappointment, discouragement. It's not that faith in Christ will keep these from entering your life – we all know that's not possible. But faith does give us a lifeline of hope for dealing with the difficulties which are bound to come our way.

It may sound like a cliché, but it's true – your faith in Christ can carry you through stresses and evils beyond your imagining.

And then, we are strong in the Lord and in his mighty power when we put on the **helmet of salvation**. So that the whole body is protected, we cover our heads with salvation. And what is salvation?

Salvation is God's giving of His Son Jesus so that we might have forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. When we know that, really know that, we cannot be shaken.

I remember a time in my life when I was so depressed, I couldn't go to church, read my Bible or pray – I was in seminary at the time. I was so grateful that I could rely on my knowledge of God's promises, as my heart was too damaged to feel anything. I knew that God was faithful to me, even though I could not be faithful to Him. I also knew that in time, my heart would heal and that I would feel His love again someday. I believe that the helmet of salvation saved me.

Notice that all these pieces of our suit of armor are defensive, protective. Our only weapon in this armor — **the sword of the Spirit** — is the word of God. God's word is our weapon against the difficulties and dangers of the world we live in. It's how we even know anything about God, Jesus and the faith.

And so, the Christian who doesn't know the Bible is like a writer who doesn't know grammar or a scientist who doesn't know the periodic table of elements. That's why we give Bibles to children at different ages and stages here at church. Because it is important for children to read and know the Bible for themselves.

And not just our young children. I like to give study Bibles to the teenagers when they begin Confirmation class. And we adults as well ought to find ways to read the Bible. And these days, it's easier than ever with different Bible apps and devotions that can get delivered to our email inboxes every day or week. I don't think I know anyone (and I hang around a lot of churchy people) who reads their Bible TOO much.

And notice in our suit of armor that there is no protection for a person's backside. Paul assumes that we will not be turning and running from the challenges before us. For when we turn away, we will become vulnerable. The only promised way to be protected is to face the challenge straight on.

Our suit of armor is complete and yet there are 3 more verses in our lesson for today. Three extremely important verses all about **prayer**. Prayer keeps us in relationship with God; prayer keeps us growing in our faith.

A friend of mine shared with me once that when her husband was unemployed, he discovered a Bible verse and kept it in his pocket. It's from Philippians, chapter 4, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

This simple verse reminded them that God would be faithful even when they couldn't see clearly the way ahead.

Life is difficult! You know that. But then God hands you a new suit and you start to wear it.

You put on truth
 righteousness
 peace
 faith
 salvation
 the word of God
 and prayer.

And you know, it shows, and it changes your life, and you are strong.

 Able to stand firm - no matter what!

Amen.