

## **The Whole Armor of God**

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18

Ephesians 6: 10-20

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### *Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18*

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.

Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

### *Ephesians 6: 10-20*

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench 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. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

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The whole armor of God—with images of heavy metal breastplates and shields, helmets and swords—was an image of faith that I used to really struggle with. The vision of conquests, battles and military did not fit with Jesus, the baby born when a mighty warrior was expected as it was a time of Roman occupation, and certainly Roman soldiers played a role in his crucifixion. It did not fit with the Prince of Peace, the One who encouraged us all with the reassuring words, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” And it did not fit with Jesus welcoming others,

even those more difficult to welcome—the hungry, the tired, the stranger, the prisoner and those who were ill. And it also did not fit with Jesus’ commandment that we love one another as he has loved us. I knew there was certainly much more to Paul’s words than I could hear, but I just could not get past the mental picture of a battlefield.

But as I said, I *used to* struggle with this passage, this image of faith. Several years ago I attended the ordination of a seminary classmate. As this passage was slowly read by a member of the congregation, her mother and the pastor dressed her in all the traditional clergy apparel, and there was a brief commentary for each piece of clothing, each accessory.

*‘Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.’* Here is where a clergy robe, a symbol of her God-ordained calling, was placed on her, and it was secured with a cincture, a rope sash as a symbol of willingness to serve God’s people.

*‘As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.’* She was given a new pair of comfortable shoes so that she could walk, stand and run as she needed in her ministry whenever and wherever she was preaching and proclaiming the gospel.

*‘With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.’* Here she was given a clerical collar as a sign of witness whether she was sitting as an advocate in a courtroom, keeping vigil in a hospital room, or marching in protest against injustice.

*‘Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.’* Lastly, she was given a new bible: God’s words, Jesus’ salvation and the Spirit’s wisdom.

The military image of Paul’s words dissolved as I watched this. The whole armor of God was finally no longer military might and warrior weapons but was the realization of being strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power and rooted in God’s love, through vulnerability, courage and integrity that allow us to stand firm.

As I watched her being dressed in the whole armor of God, I knew my turn would come soon as my own ordination was just a few months away, yet I also saw beyond the individual rite of ordination and on to the whole congregation, to the whole community of faith. It was only a short time earlier in this letter when Paul had begged the faithful to lead lives worthy of the calling of which they had been called. Christ gave spiritual gifts to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

The church is united as one body in Christ, and we are to take an active role in pursuing God’s justice, God’s goodness. As the body of Christ, as an active community, *we* collectively put on the whole armor of God so that we cannot become complacent or numbed by the daily reality of the evils in our midst. This spiritual arming means that we put into practice what we have been called and created to do. The church stands ‘against the wiles of the devil’ by love and reconciliation, and by the peace and righteousness for which we long and work for in the world.

*‘Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.’* In our baptism and our faith walk we put on the new self that God created and gave to us in Christ. We speak the truth in love and gentleness, even when it is not easy to do so. We guard our hearts.

*‘As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.’* We are prepared to take a stand for what is just and right, we are prepared to walk alongside those in need, we are prepared to stand firm in grace without abusing it.

*'With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.'* Our faith can protect and guard us during personal trials and global problems as it deflects doubts and fear as though we have no protection.

*'Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.'* We hold on to and live out Jesus' teachings so that we have 'the mind of Christ', and we live by the words of Scripture.

Putting on the whole armor of God is also how we live out the prophetic invitation of Joshua, "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Putting on the whole armor of God is a way that we recall- just like the people that Joshua had gathered and presented to God- that we are a covenant people, that we live with the conditional promises made to humanity by God, and can tell them in our shared story of God's mighty acts. Joshua's words are a covenant renewal then and now.

As the body of Christ, as an active community, we collectively put on the whole armor of God, this spiritual arming, to put into practice what we have been called and created to do, to revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness, always mindful of God's relentless advocacy for the full freedom of all people.

As we hear the words to put on the full armor of God, to serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness, as Christian love, unity and covenant rather than as soldiers going off to battle, we hear these words as the Taliban rules Afghanistan in a sudden and chaotic devastating sweep to power, as Haiti yet again is devastated by an earthquake, storms and government failures, and as Covid rebounds with mutations that set us all back. We are reminded that our struggle is against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness. Our armor is a survival strategy for persons of faith in a hostile world so that we can stand fast. Our armor is a defense as we are strengthened by the Spirit through the Word, and in prayer. Donning the armor of God does not make us an impenetrable, impassable community who does not hear the cries of others, but rather strengthens us for the bold ways we can, do and will pray, support, contribute, care, persevere and advocate for all God's people.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Amen.