

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on August 25, 2024

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

Love is the fulfillment of the law; put on Christ; salvation is near.

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.

What's your reaction when you hear the writer of Ephesians describe the life of faith as a battle against forces of evil. What do you think when you hear him talk about putting on the whole armor of God so we can withstand the wiles of the devil?

If you're anything like me, it sounds a little strange, and maybe even off-putting. Honestly, I have a hard time relating to it. I don't walk around feeling like I'm engaged in spiritual warfare. That's not what it means to me to follow Jesus. I'm Presbyterian. To me, living my faith is about sharing the gospel, being compassionate, doing justice—that kind of thing—not fighting some kind of supernatural enemy.

So what's someone like me supposed to do with this reading? Is there a way for me to get something out of it even though it's coming from a very different place than what I've personally experienced? I think it helps to have a little bit of background.

First of all, Ephesians probably wasn't written by Paul himself, but by someone who came along after him—a follower of his, who wrote in his name, which was a way of honoring someone. And it may or may not be addressed to Christians living in the actual city of Ephesus. All of which is to say, there's a lot we don't know about this letter.

But one thing we can say for sure is that the Ephesians were a religious minority living somewhere in the Roman Empire,

probably in what is today the modern country of Turkey. And although the letter never mentions anything specific about the Ephesians being persecuted, they almost certainly had to deal on a daily basis with hostility from their neighbors and harassment by the civil authorities. They may have experienced being taken to the local pagan temple, for instance, and made to worship the emperor as a test of their allegiance. At the very least, they probably got a lot of suspicious looks when they went out in public, and they probably felt like outsiders in their own community.

They were also former pagans themselves, who'd converted to Christianity somewhere along the line, but were still hanging on to their old cosmology—their old way of understanding how the universe operated. They believed that between the heavens above and the earth below, there was a spiritual realm where malevolent forces lived, and these forces liked nothing more than to mess with humanity. They liked to confuse us, tempt us, and discourage us. So being a Christian, for the Ephesians, was about being caught up in a great cosmic struggle, not against a flesh and blood enemy, but against the powers of sin and darkness and death manifest in actual living beings—beings who were constantly interfering with us, trying to lead us away from redemption in Christ.

And that's where the armor of God comes in.

In order to resist these beings, the writer of Ephesians tells his readers to equip themselves with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the proclamation of the gospel. These gifts of grace, the writer says, will keep believers “strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”

So the Ephesians were definitely not Presbyterian. They definitely had their own theological perspective. But when you look beyond that, they really weren't that

different from us. They experienced evil forces that threatened to overwhelm their faith, and so do we. We just tend to think of evil a little bit differently. Where the Ephesians saw demons and devils and that sort of thing, we see plain old human brokenness. We see people hurting one another, exploiting one another, neglecting one another on a daily basis. We see violence and bloodshed. We see hatred and division. We see indifference and scorn.

In the past few weeks alone, we've witnessed an assassination attempt on a former president, the fatal police shooting of Sonya Massey, an innocent Black woman, and the ongoing death and destruction in Gaza and Ukraine. And the end result, oftentimes, is that we start to question our belief in God. We start to wonder, “Where is God in all of this?” and little by little our faith gets eroded. Like a rock in an ever-flowing stream of human sin and suffering, it gets worn down until it's just a tiny little pebble, and the current sweeps it away.

And I'll be the first to admit that happens to me sometimes. Sometimes my faith gets worn down to nothing. Sometimes I look at the world and all the problems we have that seem so impossible to fix, and I start asking myself: Is God paying attention? Is God even there? Or are we alone in this life? Because that's sure how it seems sometimes.

So even though the writer of Ephesians has a very different worldview than me, I'm right there with him when he talks about putting on the whole armor of God. However we conceptualize it, evil is a very real thing, and it cuts right to the heart of who we are as believers. It challenges us to the core. Which means we have to work at keeping our faith alive. We can't take it for granted. We have to defend it from all the forces that would weaken and wither it. And to me that's what the armor of God is about.

I see this as basically a list of things to focus on in our everyday lives—values to hold on to, priorities to keep in front of us and not lose sight of; attitudes and outlooks to nurture and develop. Things like truth—the truth that God is real, that God loves us, that God seeks us out even when we don't want to be found. Things like righteousness—living the way God wants us to live, for one another, rather than how the world tells us we should live, for ourselves. And things like salvation—leaning into our relationship with God and letting it free us from the past so we can live for the future.

Think of it as having a spiritual workout routine. If we put on the armor of God everyday, if we make it a regular practice to focus on this list of things, it'll keep our faith healthy and strong, and nothing will be able to wear it down. And if we stick with that metaphor, then Valley would be our spiritual gym, and we'd all be one another's spiritual gym buddies.

That's half the reason you go to a gym—because working out at home gets boring, and there's no one there to hold you accountable, and it's easy to get tired and give up. But when you go to a gym, and you're surrounded by other people who are all there for the same reason, it keeps you going. It gives you motivation. It makes you want to work harder.

That's what church does for us as believers. It gives us community. It gives us support. It gives us encouragement. And we all need that if we want to keep going on this path Jesus laid out for us.

Let me wrap this up with a little story. Daisy and I had some friends stay with us over the weekend, a couple we met when we lived in Kentucky. They were dropping their daughter off at college, and they stopped by to see us on their way home. At one point I was talking to the husband, Russ, and he was asking me about how the pandemic has affected the church.

I told him a lot of people discovered during the pandemic that they like doing other things on Sunday morning, or they like just not having to get up and drag the kids out of bed and go to worship, and those are the people who have not come back and maybe never will.

But the other side of the coin is, a lot of people discovered how much going to church means to them, and how hard it is to live their faith on their own, and how important it is to be part of a community, and those are the people who have come back, and they've brought new energy and a new spirit.

So, we'll just have to wait and see what happens, but I think maybe the pandemic has shown us who we really are, and maybe we'll look back some day and see this as a moment when we became more committed to one another, and more thoughtful and purposeful about putting on the whole armor of God. Amen.