

TAKE UP THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

Ephesians 6:10–24

Key Verse: 6:13

“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.”

Do you ever feel vulnerable? It can mean something good. Like when we're open and honest about our weaknesses, emotions or needs. But it also can mean something bad. Like being so weak, somebody could easily take advantage of us. Vulnerability doesn't just describe some people. All throughout our lives we're so vulnerable. Infants, children, highschoolers, college students, singles, married couples, women, men, seniors—we're all vulnerable. And our vulnerabilities are both human and spiritual. But most of us are unaware of how spiritually vulnerable we are. Christians are not exempt from it. In fact, the more serious we are about God's will, the more vulnerable to attack we become. What can we do? In today's passage Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians urging us to take up the whole armor of God. What does he mean? How can we do it? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

I. Stand (10–13)

Verse 10 begins with the word “Finally.” It indicates Paul is concluding the letter. And in this conclusion he gives us many imperatives: “Be strong!” “Put on!” “Take up!” “Stand!” “Keep alert!” Usually we think of these commands as what we have to do as individuals. But in the original language, the verbs are all in plural form. Paul is addressing the whole church, united. Read verse 10. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” What does Paul mean by “Be strong”? With great effort or willpower, we might make ourselves stronger in some respects. But spiritually, we can't make ourselves stronger, even a tiny bit. A better translation might be: “Be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” Paul is saying strength is something we receive from the Lord. He's referring to Jesus. Paul knew this personally. Knowing the temptations of both

plenty and hunger, he wrote: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Php4:13).

In Ephesians 1 Paul prayed that we might know “what is the immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet...” (1:19–22a). All this mighty power of God in Christ is now “toward us.” But we are not strengthened in Christ’s power naturally. We have to open up to him, receive him, depend on him, rely on him. If we’re relying on ourselves—our efforts, our knowledge, our discipline, abilities, experience or cleverness—we can’t have his strength. Being strengthened in the strength of his might happens only when we’re totally helpless. It’s a paradox. In a different letter Paul wrote: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me...For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2Co 12:9–10). To be spiritually strong, we don’t have to pretend, or hide our weaknesses; we just have to rely on Jesus humbly.

Paul puts it another way. Look at verse 11. “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.” Using the imagery of a soldier, Paul mentions “the whole armor of God.” He says this armor is available to us. But we need to “put it on.” We’ll see more about this later. But Paul begins by helping us see why we need it. He says, “...that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.” The Greek root word for “be able” is related to our word “dynamo,” and this root word is repeated here four times (10: “be strong,”; 11: “be able”; 13: “be able”; 16: “can”). So when Paul says “be able,” he means, “have power.” Another important word here is “schemes.” In Greek it means “cunning, craftiness, trickery or deceit.” Conceited people think they’re more clever than anybody. But nobody can outsmart the devil. He’ll defeat us every time. Without God’s help, we have no power to stand against him.

Paul explains further. Look at verse 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.” In this fascinating verse Paul is pulling back the curtain on a

frightening spiritual reality. Who knew all this was against us? All these powers are vastly superior to us, and they're all colluding and conspiring with the devil himself. Sounds like we're totally outmatched. But Paul's point is not to scare us. It's just to show why we need the whole armor of God. As he already said, God's power for us in Christ is far above every evil power. But if we don't clothe ourselves with Christ, no matter how confident we may feel, we're all like sitting ducks for the devil.

Look at verse 12 again, and notice how Paul uses the expression "we wrestle." It's the only time in the Bible this word is used. And Paul says he's wrestling, too. Did you know that as Christians, we're all called to be spiritual wrestlers? Nobody's above it, exempt from it, or too good for it. Wrestling implies the fiercest, hand-to-hand combat. And the point is, the devil is always trying to pin us down by the neck. Our goal, on the other hand, is very simple: to "stand." This verb "stand" is also repeated here four times (11,13 [2X],14). Regardless of how hard or in how many ways the devil tries to knock us down, in spiritual wrestling we seek to stand in the strength of Jesus. And he's able to make us stand (Ro14:4). When we're tired, we have no strength to stand anymore. But when we depend on the mighty power of our Lord Jesus, we can get up and stand for him again.

How does he help us? Read verse 13. "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." The secret is in taking up the whole armor of God. This word "take up" is here and in verse 16. It's like all that armor is sitting on the ground right next to us. But it'll do us no good there. We've got to take it up! Paul also says repeatedly to "put it on" (11,14). It's the same word he used when he told us to "put on" our new self (4:24). It's the same word Paul used in Romans 13:14: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Look at verse 13 again. Paul adds, "...that you may be able to withstand in the evil day..." What day is that? It may refer to a time of great evil at the end of the world. But it especially refers to the particular times in life when the devil attacks us. He attacks when we're at our weakest. We don't know when that "evil day" will come, or how evil it will be. But we don't have to be afraid of it, because we have Jesus, the whole armor of God. In his last written letter in the Bible, right

before his death, Paul wrote: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom” (2Ti4:18a). He didn’t just teach about fighting spiritually; he modeled it. With faith in Jesus our Lord, he could withstand even the injustice of execution. He could stand firm to the end, holding on to the hope of being with Jesus safely in his heavenly kingdom. Like him, with faith in Jesus we don’t fear even the most evil day. Like Paul in prison, we might be worn out, exhausted, facing all kinds of opposition and resistance. How can we keep going? How can we finish our lives of faith strongly like he did? Paul puts it so simply here: “Take up the whole armor of God.”

II. The whole armor of God (14–17)

How do we “take up” this armor? It has two parts: the armor we put on our bodies, and that which we take up in our hands. In both cases, though God gives it to us, it’s our responsibility to take it up and put it on. In taking up this armor we imitate God. Isaiah describes God as having “put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head...” (Isa59:17a). And God’s Messiah wears righteousness and faithfulness as “the belt of his loins” (Isa11:5). This God is calling us to imitate him in his fight to save his people and defeat evil.

Read verse 14. It all starts with fastening on “the belt of truth.” In Greek the word “belt” refers to a leather apron soldiers wore to cover their core. It was to protect a most vulnerable part of the human body. If this part of the body gets punctured, it causes great pain and bleeding, and the person goes into shock. The devil wants to attack us at our core. How can we protect our core? We really need the belt of truth. But what does it mean? In Ephesians Paul’s been talking about the truth of the gospel (1:13; 4:21) as well as the truth of our living and speaking (4:15,24–25; 5:9). So, fastening on the belt of truth means holding firmly to the gospel truth, and, speaking and living out the truth in community. Truth is crucial.

Next is the “breastplate.” In armor, the breastplate protects our heart and lungs, which we also so desperately need. Here it’s called “the breastplate of righteousness.” It refers to God’s righteousness, which he gives us by his grace through faith in Christ. But based on this righteousness, it’s also the sanctification the Holy Spirit works out in our character and behavior. By faith in Jesus we start

acting righteously toward God and toward each other. And this righteousness God gives us in Christ protects our hearts from all Satan's accusations.

Read verse 15. It's a bit surprising that the next part of the armor Paul mentions is "shoes." Shoes sometimes seem like an afterthought, but shoes are very important. If our foot gets punctured, we can't move very easily. Though Paul tells us many times to just stand, this part of the armor suggests that we've got to move. So shoes come third on the list of armor parts. They seem as foundational as the belt and breastplate. And here, the shoes are called "the readiness given by the gospel of peace." We all stand in the same kind of shoes. Though we're all wrestling with the devil, with people we're all ready to share the gospel of peace. Peace among ourselves has been one of Paul's important themes in Ephesians (2:14–15,17; 4:3). We need to be ready in real gospel faith to fight for this peace.

The other parts of the armor we're told to "take." Read verse 16. In Paul's time a soldier's shield was 4 feet tall and 2.5 feet wide, made of wood covered with leather and trimmed with metal. Soldiers were attacked by flaming arrows, and such a shield could stop them all. And when soldiers lined up and all took up these shields, it really united them into an invincible unit. Here it's called "the shield of faith." Every arrow the devil shoots at us can be knocked down with this shield. So Paul urges us to take it "in all circumstances." Earlier he said God gives us this faith as a gift, so it's not a faith that makes us boastful (2:8–9). It's simply a faith in who God is. It's a real relationship with God, by faith in his amazing grace. If we just hold onto this faith in God's grace and his great love, in all circumstances, no matter how hard things get, the devil gets defeated every time.

Read verse 17. The helmet of salvation protects our most vital part, our head. Sometimes soldiers fought without a helmet, but at crucial times they needed to remember to put it on. It's called a "helmet of salvation," meaning to remember how God saves us, only through Jesus (Ac4:12), both now and in the future. With this helmet, we don't have to calculate how to save ourselves. When we put it on in the midst of our struggles, we can think clearly. And the last part of our armor is not defensive but offensive: "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (17b). With this weapon our Lord Jesus defeated all the devil's subtle temptations (Mt4:1–11). We need to learn how to handle this sword

(2Ti2:15). It means to remember that the Spirit gives the word its power. And it means to use the word not only to defeat the devil but also to help people deeply (Heb4:12).

III. Pray (18–20)

After putting on “the whole armor of God,” we may seem totally ready, but Paul adds that we also need to pray. How? Read verse 18. “...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...” This is no sleepy prayer, sporadic prayer, intellectual prayer, or selfish prayer. It’s prayer at all times—morning, noon and night. It’s prayer in the Spirit—with the Spirit helping us know what to pray for. Sometimes he helps us just to groan. Sometimes, when we have no words, he intercedes for us (Ro8:26–27). So it’s not just attending prayer meetings, but living a life of prayer throughout the day, taking moments to pray about everything. Such prayer keeps us spiritually alert. It’s prayer “with all perseverance,” no matter what we’re suffering. And it’s prayer “for all the saints.” It’s such fervent prayer that keeps us united. Read verses 19–20. Paul not only asks for prayer support, but also for them to pray for him to proclaim the mystery of the gospel “boldly.” How much more we need to pray for such boldness!

IV. Final greetings (21–24)

In this last part Paul mentions Tychicus, who carried this letter to the Ephesians all the way from Rome (21–22). Paul calls him “the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord.” Tychicus was a Gentile, but what respect Paul had for him! Probably he was one of Paul’s early converts in Ephesus (Ac20:4). He also carried Paul’s letter to the Colossians, which was near Ephesus (Col4:7). Once Paul considered sending Tychicus to Titus so they could come together and meet him at Nicopolis (Tit3:12). At the end of his life Paul sent Tychicus to Ephesus again (2Ti4:12). Paul trusted Tychicus because he understood Paul’s labor for unity among the churches. Such a man could encourage their hearts (22b).

Read verses 23–24. “Peace,” “love with faith,” and “grace”—these are the best blessings Paul could give them. He especially blessed those who love our

Lord Jesus Christ with “love incorruptible.” To have such love for Jesus may be the best goal in life.

Read verse 13 again. May God make us aware of our vulnerability. May we take up the whole armor of God. And may we all stand firm in this armor, especially in unity, grace and love, overcome this present darkness, and bless the world.