

The full armour of God

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[0 : 0 0] Are you a loser? You didn't come to church to be insulted. Well, I'm asking the question, and you can try and answer it. But I wonder, as a Christian, do you experience defeat on a regular basis? Are you defeated when you face temptation? As you examine yourself with a measure of sincerity, are you able or do you have to recognize that that is your experience? Again, I'm simply posing the question for you to consider. As Christians, we are guaranteed ultimate victory.

And Christ has won the victory for us. And it is God who has begun a work in us that will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. And that is certain. And we will remain standing on that day, to use the language that Paul uses here repeatedly, of standing firm and remain standing. But along the way, until we reach that day, there's no automatic guarantee of living in victory, of day by day being victorious in the living out of our faith, of defeating temptation temptation and resisting temptation when it assails us. We do often fail. We often lose. We're often defeated. Of course, the reason why that is, is because we don't make use of the resources that

God gives us. And last week, we were thinking of the call to battle, this battle against the devil and his hosts. And we were encouraged to put on the full armor of God. And the implication is clear that if we fail to do that, then we'll be ill-equipped. We'll be vulnerable. And we'll be easy prey to our enemy and his scheming. We need to put on the armor. And that's what we want to think about this evening. We want to think about what the armor is. It's described for us here by Paul, or it's identified what this armor is. As I was thinking about this passage, it struck me. I don't know if you can relate to what I'm going to say, but it struck me that there are passages in the Bible with which we can be very familiar. And yet, when we actually sit down and think about it, we don't really have much idea what they actually mean. I certainly find that to be often the case.

You know, say, oh, well, this is a familiar passage. And then I'll just ask myself the question, go, okay, I know that verse. It's familiar to me. I've heard it so often. What does it actually mean? And I often find myself thinking, well, I don't know what it actually means. Familiar, though the words are. And I wonder whether this passage comes into that category or certainly parts of it. Very familiar language, very visual language, very easy for us perhaps to conjure up that the picture that's being painted, this very visual picture. But what does it mean?

Maybe some of us, if we've been brought up in Christian homes and going to Sunday school, we've colored in pictures of the fully armored Christian soldier. As you read the passage, maybe these visual images come to mind. And you can picture the pieces of the armament that Paul is identifying here. Maybe some of you have heard many sermons on the subject or have read books about the armor of God and could give a pretty good description of these different pieces of armor as they relate to the Roman soldier and his armor, his whole armor that is described, or at least some of it here. And that's good. It's good to have that knowledge. But again, the question is, what does it all actually mean? What does each picture given correspond to? And in what way does each piece of the armor help us in our daily battle as soldiers battling against the devil and his hosts?

[4 : 48] Well, let's try and answer these questions in some measure as we look at each piece of armor in the order that Paul presents them in the passage. Now, before we do that, it may be helpful to just note the background to the imagery that is used here by Paul in the passage. Now, I've already mentioned just very pleatingly how the pieces of armor correspond to the armor worn by a Roman soldier.

That would have been a familiar sight for Paul's original readership, those he's writing to there in Ephesus. Indeed, it was a very familiar sight for Paul as he writes this letter. He writes it or dictates it, however it was. But as he writes this letter, he was in chains, chained to a Roman soldier.

He makes reference to that there in verse 20, for which I am an ambassador in chains. And I think it's reasonable to understand that to be a reference to how he was chained to a Roman soldier. Now, that soldier presumably didn't have the full regalia on as he was given the task of looking after Paul. Paul would have been a pretty unthreatening prisoner. I don't think the soldiers would have been in great fear of him escaping or attacking them. So, they certainly wouldn't have needed their helmet and their shield and their sword, presumably. Maybe the sword they'd have had, I don't know. But he would have been very familiar with what a Roman soldier looked like. And he employs those pictures as he teaches us concerning spiritual armor. But that's not the only background we have in terms of the imagery that Paul is using. He also draws very heavily on language that is used, especially by the prophet Isaiah, in describing God as our mighty warrior. And on a number of occasions here, it seems very likely that Paul has in mind language and pictures that we find in that book of the Bible in the Old Testament. We're not going to really make reference to that this evening, but it's good to know that that's also in the background. What we want to do then is three things.

We want to identify each piece of armor. Now, that's the easy part. You just need to read the verses, identify each of them. But then what we want to do is determine what each piece of armor corresponds to in the realm of spiritual equipment or spiritual weaponry or spiritual resources.

And that's where it's not quite as easy as it might seem to actually say, well, okay, the belt of truth, what is that? What does that correspond to in our real world? What does that look like? What is that?

[7 : 42] So, we'll try and establish what it is. But then we'll try and think about how does this help us as we fight? How does this help us in the battle that we are in? So, that's what we're trying to do.

Identify what the pieces of armament are. That's easy. Try and establish what this means, what it corresponds to, and then of what use it is for us. So, that's the way we're going to try and work through this. We'll just go in the order that we find the armament identified by Paul. The first one, then in verse 14, stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled round your waist. So, that's where we begin. Paul speaks of this first piece of the armor, the belt of truth. What is it? What is the belt of truth? In trying to identify what the belt of truth is, the key really or an important question is to establish what truth is Paul referring to. Paul, and not only Paul, the biblical writers use the word truth with different senses. We can think of truth as the objective truth of God as it is delivered to us, revealed to us, and recorded for us in the Bible. The Bible is the word of truth. Paul uses that language when he's challenging and instructing young Timothy. He speaks of the importance of knowing the word of truth. Is that what Paul is speaking about here when he speaks of putting on the belt of truth or having been buckled with the belt of truth? It could be, but it seems unlikely that that is what Paul has in mind given, that he goes on in describing the other pieces of the armor to specifically speak of one of those pieces of armor, the sword of the Spirit, as the Word of God.

So, it does seem unlikely that he would speak of the same thing in two ways. That doesn't seem very likely at all. Given that, I think we can understand that Paul here is using the word truth in the sense of truthfulness or integrity. And we could think of truthfulness maybe in two senses.

The reality is that in so many of these things, we can go in so many directions and make a case for it, but we need to try and discipline ourselves a little bit. But let's think of truthfulness in two senses. First of all, the importance of a truthful view of ourselves. I'm thinking of the kind of language we find in the Psalms, how God looks for and values truth in the inner parts, how He encourages us to be those in whose heart there is no deceit, that truthful view of who we are.

Without this, without a truthful, realistic, genuine appreciation of who we are and of our limitations and of our sinfulness, then we can't even begin in the battle. If we don't have a truthful view of who we are and how we stand in urgent need of God's help, then we can't even begin. At the very start of the daily ritual of putting on our armor, we need to look in the mirror of our soul and see who we are, a sinner in need of God's grace and help. Truthfulness, a true, honest understanding of who we are. But another aspect of truthfulness, and maybe the one that Paul particularly has in mind, is truthfulness in our character and conduct. I think it is likely that Paul has in view the idea of truthfulness or integrity in the way in which we live and behave and conduct ourselves as Christians.

[11 : 51] That is to mark us. This is the belt that we are to wear. Men and women of God who live lives marked by truthfulness, by integrity. The one we face, our enemy, is a deceiver. He's a liar. He uses all kinds of scheming and deceit to achieve his ends. We are different. We do not use those weapons.

The weapon we use is the belt of truth. We are to be marked by integrity and sincerity. We are not to be dragged down to the level of the one we oppose. So that may be at least as a suggestion of what Paul is saying or what this belt of truth is that we are to put on. How does this piece of armor help us? Well, even in describing it, I think there's already an indication of how it could help us. But maybe if we just develop it a little bit, a truthful view of ourselves will ensure a healthy and necessary sense of dependence on God, our commander-in-chief, to use the kind of military picture. Integrity and truthfulness in our conduct will also aid us as we wrestle with the enemy.

A man of integrity, a woman of character, of Christian character, of truthfulness in behavior is not easily lured into temptation. It's also the case that truthfulness and integrity of character and conduct will be honored and owned by God as He accompanies us and helps us in the battle.

So we need to put on the belt of truth. Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist. But we need to move on and notice what the next item of armor is, and that is the breastplate of righteousness. Stand firm then with the belt of righteousness in place. Now again, we have the challenge of deciding, determining, trying to determine the significance of this word righteousness.

As with truth, or as with the word truth, this word righteousness is used in the New Testament by Paul in two ways, two quite distinct ways. Obviously, they're connected, but nonetheless quite distinct ways. The word righteousness is used to speak of Christ's righteousness that is given to us, or to use the theological language that is imputed to us, a righteousness not our own, the righteousness of Christ that we are clothed with, that we are given as a gift. There's this sweet exchange that we hand over to Him our sin, and He gives in return His righteousness. We're declared not only not guilty when we trust in Jesus, but innocent because we receive as a gift His righteousness. And Paul often speaks of righteousness in this sense. If we just give one example of the many that we could point to in Philippians, just a couple of pages on in the next letter, in Philippians chapter 3 and verses 8 and 9, listen to what Paul says with regard to righteousness understood in this sense of Christ's righteousness. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing

[15 : 29] Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith, a righteousness not my own. So, when Paul here speaks of the importance as believers of putting on the breastplate of righteousness, perhaps that is what he has in mind, an understanding, a sense of the righteousness that we have that is not our own, but that is given to us. But of course, that word righteousness is also used in another sense by Paul and in the Bible, and that is in the sense of righteous character and conduct, the righteous character and conduct that is to mark, indeed to distinguish, the believer. And Paul uses the word, this very word, in that sense, in this letter on more than one occasion. If we just turn back one chapter to the previous chapter in Ephesians, or two chapters, in chapter 4 and in verse 24, notice how Paul employs the word there. We probably need to... well, let's just take it from verse 24, even though we're jumping into a sentence.

And to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. And then notice what he goes on to say, therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor. And he goes on, he's speaking about conduct, he's speaking about honesty, he's speaking about speaking truthfully, and he speaks of these things under the umbrella of righteousness. He's saying you are to be righteous in your conduct, in your lifestyle. That is what is to mark and characterize you. Well, what is it here when we read of this piece of our armor, the breastplate of righteousness? Is it Christ's righteousness that is given to us? Is it our righteousness that with God's help we live or seek to live righteous lives? Speaking the truth, speaking honestly, obeying God's commands. I think on this occasion, there's no need or requirement to choose between the two. It may be, to be honest, I don't know. But it may be that Paul is intending us to see both senses as relevant to our defenses, our breastplate, which is to defend us.

Well, let's just think about this a little bit more by asking the subsequent question, how does this piece of armor help us? In the light of what we're suggesting the armor is, how does it help us? Well, if we think of Christ's righteousness given to us, imputed to us, to have a clear view and appreciation of our being clothed in the righteousness of Christ provides the believer, provides you as a believer a solid defense against the accusations of the devil.

When the devil would seek to sow doubt in your mind and would sow that doubt that you begin to ask, well, can I be a Christian at all? I'm such a sinner. I fall short so often. I don't resist temptation as I ought. Maybe I'm not a Christian at all. And the devil seeks to sow those doubts, and he lances these accusations against us. To have that clear, humble, and yet clear appreciation that we are clothed in a righteousness not our own provides a firm defense against the devil. We can join with Paul in confidently declaring, who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?

That includes you. Who can bring any charge? It is God who justifies. It is God who makes righteous. Who is he that condemns? So that provides a clear defense. It's a breastplate.

[19 : 40] But also, if we think of righteousness in the sense of our righteous character and conduct, that also provides a defense. I would suggest it's not as strong a defense, but nonetheless a defense against the attacks of the evil one. As we humbly recognize that with God's help, we are living righteous lives, we will have no reason to waver when attacked or accused. A clear conscience brings stability and security to the soul. Maybe if we kind of draw the two together, we could say this, or simply quote what another has said on this matter, the completeness of pardon for past offense and the integrity of character that belong to the justified life are woven together into an impenetrable mail, as in the material of our breastplate. So the breastplate of righteousness, what it is and how it helps us. Moving on. The next thing, what was the next piece of the armor that we have here? Well, we read there in verse 15, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. What is the piece of armor? On this occasion, Paul doesn't specifically identify a piece of kit, but the kit in question is obvious enough. It's footwear of some description. He speaks of feet fitted, well, obviously fitted with footwear. Presumably the sandals, sturdy sandals that the Roman soldier would use would use to go into battle. The spiritual resource that is identified here quite clearly is the gospel of peace, your feet fitted with the gospel of peace. The question here, in terms of working out what it is Paul is saying, is whether Paul has in mind that it is the gospel that grants to the believer readiness for service, or whether our announcement of the gospel is to be characterized by readiness. Now, both are true. It is true that it is the gospel that grants us readiness, and it's also true that we are to proclaim the gospel with readiness. But it does seem, and certainly the manner in which what Paul says is translated here in our translation or in the NIV favors the idea that it's the gospel that equips us and makes us ready. That's the way that the language has been translated here, with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. The gospel grants us that readiness for service. The gospel of peace secures for the believer peace with God, the necessary starting point for all service to God. We can't serve a God that we are enemies with. The gospel grants us readiness, and we in turn proclaim the gospel with readiness. Having been graciously given peace with God, it is our great desire to share with others the gospel that grants peace. It is striking how in the midst of all this military vocabulary and picture language, we're reminded so clearly that the gospel we serve and proclaim is a gospel of peace. Even the word peace seems somewhat out of place in the midst of all this talk of armament, but that is what we have. The gospel that equips us, the gospel that we proclaim is a gospel of peace. And that also is a reminder to us that our enemy, as we were seeing last week, our enemy is the devil and his hosts, not those who are captives to the devil. You know, we don't battle to destroy or eliminate or dominate unbelievers. That's not what we're about. Our wrestling is rather to rescue

those who are captives of our enemy, the devil. And we do that by announcing the gospel of peace. We go to war to announce the gospel of peace. How does this piece of armor help us? Well, the gospel equips us, it readied us, the gospel, the gospel, the gospel. We go to war. The gospel of peace, just like Jesus did in this same letter. And maybe Paul has in mind this example of Jesus as he writes there at the end of the letter in chapter 2 of Ephesians in verse 17. He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near. He presents Jesus as one who came to proclaim peace, to preach peace to those who are near and those who are far. And that is what we do, feet fitted to proclaim the gospel of peace. What's the next piece of armor? Well, the next one is the shield of faith. There in verse 16, in addition to all this, take up the shield of faith.

What is it? What is the shield of faith? What we haven't done this evening, partly for reasons of time, is we haven't gone into describing each of these pieces of weaponry in terms of the actual weaponry that a Roman soldier would have used. But we will just do that on this occasion because it's a very visual image that I'm sure we're all familiar with. These, you know, very large, rectangular shields that the Roman soldiers would use. They could arrange themselves in such a way as to give themselves protection from arrows that were being sent. The door-shaped shield, I'm sure you can picture it. Curiously, the very word that is used here for shield, the word that was used to describe that particular shield, means door. Not surprising given the shape of it. Well, that's what Paul has in mind in terms of the visual image. But the question is, what is this shield of faith?

And again, we have really the same kind of question that we've been asking about the meaning of the key word. Here is the word faith. Is faith to be understood as what we might call an objective reality? The faith once delivered to the saints, that body of truth that we can describe as the faith, the Christian faith. Is that what we're talking about? Are we to understand faith in the sense of our day-to-day trusting in God in the midst of the battle? I think it is the latter that Paul has in mind. Faith in that sense of our trusting in God. Of course, the faith is very important. But here, I think faith is to be understood in that sense. We can maybe think of it in this way.

God is our shield. That's a picture that is used elsewhere in the Bible. Now, obviously, the fact that elsewhere in the Bible God is described as a shield doesn't mean that we have to oblige Paul to follow that imagery. He's perfectly at liberty to use the image in other ways.

[27 : 04] But we do know that on many occasions God is presented in the Bible as our shield. And it is by faith that we can trust in Him as our shield to help us in the battle and to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one that Paul speaks of. It's not about having a big shield. The shield that Paul pictures here was a very big shield. It's not really about having a big shield. It's not a case of, well, the bigger the shield, the more protected we are. It's not about having lots of faith.

It's about having faith, however small, in a big God. That's what we were thinking about last Sunday morning when Jesus said to the disciples who had failed so miserably, who had been losers in the face of this demon-possessed young boy and they could do nothing. They failed miserably. What was the problem? Well, the problem was that it's not that they didn't have a lot of faith. It's that their faith wasn't directed to Jesus. Jesus wasn't the object of their faith. They weren't trusting in God.

That's why they failed. And the shield of faith speaks of the need for us to trust in God as our shield, as the one who can protect us in the face of the assaults that we are under.

What are these darts? Paul mentions the flaming darts of the evil one. What are they? Well, they are so many. Accusations that undermine our assurance you can't really be a Christian.

Tempting thoughts to doubt God, to disobey God. Tempted to sin of one kind or another, to pride or lust or so many other sins that we're tempted to. Any number of attitudes and actions that are displeasing to God and damaging to ourselves and others. The devil is a schemer and he will use devious means to launch his arrows. Again, there are so many examples we could maybe think of, but just think of one devious way in which he can attack us. Maybe it's through a word of praise. We all enjoy being praised. And there's a place for praising others. But isn't it the case that even well-deserved praise can be twisted and can be used by the devil to sow in us seeds of ugly, tried, and self-sufficiency?

[29 : 31] I wonder if the disciples, going back to the disciples, those of you who were here when we were talking about how they failed to cast out the demon from the poor boy there that recorded for us in Matthew 17.

I wonder if previous to that, when they'd had success, they'd driven out many demons. I wonder how the people praised them. They said, wow, it's amazing what you disciples can do. We've never seen anything like it. And it was reasonable, legitimate praise. And yet I wonder how that might have been damaging for them as these words of praise became flaming darts attacking them. How does this piece of armor help us, the shield of faith? Well, faith is the road or the route that takes us to God, our shield. Faith lays hold of the promises of God in times of doubt, in times of depression.

Faith lays hold of the power of God in times of temptation. Faith is the means whereby we can lay hold of God who is our protection and our shield, the shield of faith. But then we have two more pieces of armor to notice here. The penultimate one that we're going to think about this evening is the helmet of salvation. Verse 17, take the helmet of salvation. The helmet of salvation is simply salvation itself. It is the salvation that we already know and enjoy in Christ and includes, of course, those future aspects of salvation that we have yet to experience but that are certain in Christ. We have been forgiven. We have been redeemed. We have been adopted into the family of God.

We are being and will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. We are saved. For us, it's no embarrassment to use the language. You know, that's language sometimes used mockingly. For us, there's no embarrassment in speaking in those terms. We are saved. God has saved us. So, we put on the helmet of salvation that assurance that we are saved. We have been saved. We are being saved and we will ultimately be wholly saved by our saving God, the helmet of salvation. How does this help us? How does this piece of armor help us? Well, a settled conviction that we are saved by God grants us security in the battle. See, if we lack assurance that we are saved, then how much more difficult it is to battle as Christians. If even at the point of determining whether we are Christians at all, we need to have conviction and assurance concerning our status as those who have been saved by God. And we don't fight in order to secure our salvation. We fight as those who are already saved. The helmet of salvation.

Then the final piece of armor, the sword of the Spirit. What is it? Well, this is perhaps the easiest one, not only to identify what it is, but what it is, because Paul does it for us.

[32 : 47] Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. It would have been great if Paul on each of the occasions had said, which is, but he didn't. He only does it here. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. We mentioned this a few moments ago in suggesting that the belt of truth couldn't be the Word of God, because it seems unlikely that Paul would speak of the same thing twice. But here it's very clear. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God, and the Bible is the sword of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who provides us with God's Word, and it is the Spirit who helps us wield the sword that He provides. We don't need to dwell on that. Paul states it so clearly. But how does this piece of armor help us? Well, where to start?

The point is often made that in the list of armor, this sword is the only weapon that very clearly serves for both attack and defense. Now, that's not altogether true. Other items of the armor, you can think of them being applied both in defense and attack, certainly as they're understood in their spiritual significance. But it is true that the sword very clearly has an offensive as well as a defensive function in the armory of the soldier. And that certainly is true of the Bible. The Bible is a weapon that we can use to both defend ourselves and to attack our enemy and gain ground from our enemy. If we think of how it helps us in defending ourselves, maybe the simplest way of illustrating that is to think of Jesus and how Jesus used the Bible, the Word of God, as His defense when tempted by the devil in the desert. But then we also think of how the Bible is described in very offensive in the sense of attacking terms or attacking language. We think of what the writer to the Hebrews says or how he describes the Word of God. For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. Using the same picture of a sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrows. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, very much attacking, piercing function of the Word of God in the life of men and women as it penetrates into our very being. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. When we think of the Word of God as having that attacking function, it is interesting and possibly significant that the phrase that Paul uses here translated, the Word of God, uses a Greek word for word in the phrase, the Word of God, that is slightly different to the one he would ordinarily use. And it's possibly a word that has a focus more on the spoken word. And it may be that what Paul has in mind is the importance not only of having the written word, but of us as believers speaking that word as we engage in battle. This is a word that needs to be employed. It needs to be spoken. We need to share the Word with others that they might hear and believe, that it might penetrate into their soul as the Word is announced, as it's spoken by us,

God's people. How important for us, given that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, how important for us to know and to wield this weapon. Where would Jesus have been when faced with the devil's temptation? Had he only had a superficial knowledge of God's Word? That maybe seems inconceivable to us. In many ways it is inconceivable, but even as we speculate, where would he have been without a sound knowledge of God's Word? Well, how much more so for ourselves? This is the armor of God provided for you. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, feet fitted, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. But that is not all.

There is one further weapon or piece of armor that binds all these together, and that is prayer. That's what Paul goes on to speak of, but we're going to come back to that next week. But we can't end without one final word of challenge. The best armor in the world is only useful if put on. Throughout the passage, Paul stresses the need to put on the armor. He doesn't simply describe it. He doesn't simply help us to have this visual picture of how beautiful it is and how interesting it is and how fascinating it is. The stress is continually on putting on the armor. We need to buckle the belt. We need to put on the breastplate. We need to fit our feet. We need to take the shield. We need to wield the helmet. We need to wield the sword. There's a constant emphasis on putting on and using the armor. And these are deliberate and decisive acts on our part that need to be repeated day by day. Every day we need the armor. Every day the armor needs to be put on and the weapons deployed. And so we have the armor provided for us by God, but it is for us to put it on and to use it in the battle that he has placed us in. 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. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,