

Ephesians: *Spiritual Warfare*
Ephesians 6:16-24

If you are visiting with us this morning, we have been on a year's journey of working our way, verse by verse, through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We are in Ephesians 6, where Paul wraps up his letter by reminding the Church that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. To prepare ourselves for spiritual warfare, Paul commands the believers to take up the whole armor of God. Last week we unpacked Paul's charge to gird our loins with truth, to put on the breastplate of righteousness, as well to don our feet with the readiness of the gospel of peace. This morning we will look at the final three elements of God's armor that Paul tells us to 'take up', as well as Paul's closing words to the Ephesians. So, with no further ado, please stand, and let us read Ephesians 6:16-24:

16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 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, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.²¹ So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. 22 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. 23 Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.

My message will fall under five subheadings (bear with me!): 1) Shielded by Faith; 2) Assured in Our Salvation; 3) Armed with the Word of God; 4) Engaged in All Prayer; and 5) Final Words.

I. Shielded by Faith

Having given instruction to put on the belt, the breastplate, and the shoes, Paul now writes in vs. 16, "In all circumstances take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one..."

In the ancient Greco/Roman world, a soldier fought with two shields. One was a quite small and wrapped around the soldier's arm...not unlike Captain America's shield (show pic of Capt. America) for those of you who are Avengers fans. That small shield is not at all what Paul is referring to. Instead, Paul uses the Greek word *thureos* which refers to a tall, oblong shield behind which a soldier could be completely hidden (show pic of Roman soldier with tall shield). When the enemy's archers released hundreds of arrows, the Roman soldiers would line up their shields, plant them in the ground, and create an almost impenetrable defense (show pic of Roman army). Dr. John Stott writes that the *thureos* shields, or the *scutum* in Latin, were just under four feet tall and 2.5 feet wide. The shield consisted of two layers of wood glued together and covered first with linen and then with animal hide; it was then bound with iron above and below. It was specially designed to put out the dangerous incendiary missiles then in use, specifically arrows or spears tipped in pitch which were then lit and fired.¹ It is this massive shield of defense against the enemy's most potent weapon that Paul is now referring to.

¹ John Stott, p 281.

Before we consider the shield of faith, let us first acknowledge that Paul points to the shield of faith as the believer's defense against the Enemy's most potent weapon. And what is the Enemy's most potent weapon? For most of us, Satan's most potent weapon comes in the form of unforeseen, unpredictable temptations that set our passions on fire, right? The first and most obvious temptation of this kind might be what we commonly refer to as lust. Any man who has struggled with sexual sin knows that just a spark of temptation can set his entire mind and body on fire with lust, and often that spark of temptation was not anything he was looking for or anticipating. For example, one cannot read a single article about any subject on the internet without encountering an add with a scantily clad woman who was apparently shopping at Walmart! Such flaming arrows are constantly being shot from the Enemy, and should they land upon the dry tinder stored up in our neglected, unprotected minds and hearts, we are quickly consumed with fire, be that a fire of lust, gluttony, addiction, a wounded pride, an enraged anger, or a self-righteous snobbery. The flaming arrow comes quickly, often unnoticed until our hearts are pierced, and the fire of sin is already devouring everything in its path.

For others, the flaming arrows could be anything from lies about our identity, to severe persecution, to a suffocating fear induced by the evil that seems so prevalent in our world. To protect ourselves from these attacks, Paul says to the Christian, "Take up the shield of faith."

Now, the act of faith has no power in itself to protect us from anything. If I have faith in myself...if I have faith in my friends...if I have faith in the stock market...if I have faith in science...my faith will provide no defense whatsoever against the flaming arrows released by the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Faith does not defend us...faith in GOD defends us! In Psalm 28:7-8 David writes, "The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped...He is the saving refuge of His anointed." In Psalm 3 David laments, "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising up against me; many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God. But you, O LORD, are a shield about me..." God said to Abram in Genesis 15:1, "Fear not, Abram, for I am thy shield..." Solomon declares in Proverbs 30:5, "Every word of God proves true; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him."

Church, the LORD is our shield. Our faith, then, is simply placing our trust...which is act of the heart and the will...in the One who is stronger...the One who is impenetrable...the One who sits "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20-21).

It is not enough that we know in our minds that God is our shield...we must *take up* the shield of faith and carry it into "all circumstances," because the most lethal weapon of the Enemy comes without warning, and it comes with a fire that will burn us down to the ground if we are exposed.

Friends, I want you to take a moment and remember when you most recently felt the horrible sting of Satan's fiery arrow in your heart. Remember that horrible temptation and the catastrophic destruction of the sinful fire that enveloped your life, your relationships, and even now leaves a smoldering scar upon your memory. Was it not because you stepped out from behind the great shield of your faith in God? Was it not a product of your own neglect, that you thought so little of the Enemy and so highly of your own power that you set aside the mighty shield of faith, thinking yourself capable of fighting your own battles like some Hollywood movie star? Listen: God will no more protect you from the Enemy's arrows when you set aside

your faith than an unbuckled seatbelt will protect you from flying through the windshield of your car. God is indeed a mighty shield, capable of extinguishing even the fastest and hottest arrow in Satan's arsenal, but we must *take up* the shield of faith. We must have an active connection with the Lord so that we are wholly hidden BEHIND Him; not caught unawares, having left Him behind. The ever-so-eloquent Alexander MacLaren writes:

Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of God's power flowing into me, and working in me. And when that power flows into me, and works in me, then I can laugh at the fiery darts, because 'greater is He that is with us than all they that are with them.' To trust, however, is an act of the heart and will. There must be effort to grasp the shield, and to realize the defense which the shield gives to us. To keep behind the shield, and not depend at all upon our own wit, wisdom, or strength, but wholly upon the Christ who gives us wit and wisdom, and strengthens our fingers to fight—that will take work! To occupy the heart and mind with the object of faith is not an easy thing, and it is because we fail in this, and not because there are any holes or weak places in the shield, that so many of the fiery darts find their way through, and set on fire and wound us. The Shield is impregnable, beaten as we have often been.²

Church, where is your faith? In whom do you trust? And how is that working out for you? If your faith is in Christ, the flaming arrows of Satan himself will fall impotent at your feet. If your faith is in anything else, the wildfires in southern Canada will pale in comparison to the condition of your soul. Take up the shield of faith...take it up every day, in all circumstances, because those arrows are coming. Let us now look to the next element of God's armor...

II. Assured in Our Salvation

In addition to the shield of faith, Paul commands the believers to take up the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Now...the order of the elements is significant. If you think about it, faith is at the center, empowering believers to be truthful, to cover ourselves with the righteousness of Christ, and to be prepared with the Gospel of peace. But faith also then allows us to receive these two final parts of the armor of God...salvation and God's Word...which are, as MacLaren writes, "God's gifts, pure and simple."

The picture here is again one that comes from Isaiah 59:17, "He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head." I would encourage you to read the 59th chapter of Isaiah because the prophetic picture is that God is coming to make the wrongs right. He is coming to bring justice, to repay evil doers according to their deeds. God's righteousness is His nature, and God's salvation is the inevitable outcome of His nature. Evil will not go unpunished...God has 'put on the cloak of vengeance' so that 'they shall fear the name of the Lord.' But God's nature is not only just; His perfect righteousness means He is also perfectly merciful. So in Isaiah 59:20 we read, "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD.

Church, the promised Redeemer has come. Jesus is the Redeemer, and God accomplished perfect justice and perfect mercy when Jesus atoned for our sin on that Roman cross. We were dead in our transgressions, but God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ. We have been saved by grace, thanks be to God! Our salvation is God's gift to us. Our salvation is unmerited, and all we can do is simply reach out by faith and receive the gift that

² MacLaren, p 367.

God has given at an unthinkable cost to Himself. The helmet of salvation that God placed upon His own head is now ours to wear as a gift, for salvation has been accomplished in Christ!

So, how does the helmet of salvation defend us against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places? One of the most powerful phrases you can recite in your mind and your heart in the dark night of the soul is this phrase: “I have been saved; I am being saved; I will be saved.”

No matter our circumstances, no matter how dire the threat or how fierce the temptation, no power in hell can undo what has already been done. Christ has come; Christ has died, and Christ has risen! Our salvation is secure in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died in our place and rose again, conquering the power of sin and death. We have been saved...and that salvation is finished...it cannot be undone.

At the same time, the helmet of salvation serves as our defense against this present darkness. Because Christ is in us...because God has sent His Holy Spirit upon those who have turned from their transgressions and have called upon the name of the LORD, we are being saved even now. Day by day, year after year, we are gaining victory over the Enemy of our soul. Even our deepest wounds are not only healed but leveraged by God for a ministry that brings glory to the Father and hope to the world. You will see some beautiful examples of that truth next Sunday when you meet Meghan and Neil...two souls who have been redeemed in the most remarkable way from a world of utter darkness. Church, we have been saved, we are being saved...but let us also remember...we will be saved.

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul earlier writes, “...let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet *the hope* of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him.” Our salvation has been accomplished, but we still live in *the hope of salvation*, for a time is coming when our salvation will be fully realized.

Church, don't lose hope. Death doesn't win. The evil of this present darkness does not win. Do not be deceived—this world is not all there is. For those who are in Christ, though our helmets be dented and marred, a day will come when we shall set down our helmets, and like the Apostle Paul we shall say, “I have fought a good fight, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.” Let us not lose sight of the hope that sustains us, even in the darkest night. We shall be with Christ! We shall know fully even as we are fully known! Now we see dimly, as in clouded glass, but then we shall see Him face to face! We will be saved, and this present age shall fade away and there will be a new heaven and a new earth... “and He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, nor crying, nor pain...for the former things shall pass away.” Take up the helmet of salvation then, and *be assured of your salvation* that is accomplished, is being accomplished, and will be fully accomplished. Let us look now to the last element of God's armor that is a pure gift of His grace...

III. Armed with the Word of God

The final part of God's armor is what Paul refers to as “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...” The Greek word for sword here suggests a short sword that a Roman soldier

would use for hand-to-hand combat. This sword, says Paul, is of the Spirit...and it is the Word of God.

Now, whenever we hear “the Word of God,” we immediately think of the Bible, and that is as it should be. The Bible, as we know it, comprised of 66 books, contains the Word of God; and the Word of God is our authority in all matters of faith and practice. That said, we must remember that many, if not most of those believers hearing this letter read for the first time in first century Ephesus likely had no access to or awareness of what we refer to as the Old Testament. It is possible that Mark’s gospel was already in circulation by the time Paul writes this letter to the Ephesians, but most of the New Testament would not have been in distribution at the writing of this letter, so we should not think that Paul is referring to what we think of as “the Bible” when he writes these words in vs. 17: ‘the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God.’

Church, Paul knows that the very words he is writing to the churches in Ephesus are words that he has received from God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We know his words were inspired by God because that is why we are studying the book of Ephesians! Even though Paul often refers to the law and the prophets, Paul is pointing to Jesus, the Word made flesh, who *fulfilled* the law and the prophets. The preaching of the Gospel is, in fact, the Word of God and the sword of the Spirit.

Church, in Jesus Christ, the Logos, the Word...God speaks. God is not dead; nor is He silent. God continues to speak through His Holy Spirit, and His word brings light to the darkness. His Word brought the universe into existence. His Word cuts to the heart because God’s Word is true, unlike any other kind of “truth.”

The writer of Hebrews says it beautifully in Hebrews 4:12:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

When it comes to spiritual warfare, Satan’s method is to convince us of lies. He constantly lies, but often those lies contain just enough semblance of truth to really cause us trouble. It is only God’s Word that can cut through all the lies—both the lies of the Enemy, and even the lies that we tell ourselves.

How often have you convinced yourself that you were justified in being angry, justified in withholding your forgiveness, justified in the way you behaved, only to show up to church on Sunday and come under the conviction that you were wrong? What brought about that conviction? The Word of God. Was it a verse that came directly out of the Bible? Sometimes, right? Sometimes the written word speaks directly into our circumstances.

Whenever I think about the sword of the Spirit in the context of spiritual warfare, I always think about Jesus in the wilderness after forty days of fasting. He was weak; He was vulnerable; and Satan knew it. So, Satan tempts Jesus to satisfy his aching hunger by turning stones to bread,

and Jesus replies with the Word of God saying, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” The devil then tempts Jesus with the authority and glory of all the nations of the earth, and again Jesus replies, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.’” Finally, Satan tempts Jesus to put God to the test by jumping off the top of the temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus responds, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Luke then writes, “And when the devil had ended *every temptation*, he departed...” That battle went on for a while...we only got a small sampling of the temptations that Jesus had to deal with, and we should assume that Jesus kept swinging the sword of the Spirit to defend Himself from the Enemy the whole time!

Quoting God’s word as written in the Bible is absolutely taking up the sword of the Spirit, and there is no better way to kick some spiritual forces in the face than to quote the Word of God in the midst of every trial and tribulation. Obviously, you can’t quote what you don’t know, so we must spend time memorizing scripture if we hope to use that sword to our advantage, right? My friend Matt became deathly ill a few years ago and spent two weeks in an induced coma. He swears that the whole time he was under, he was battling demons in the spiritual realm. I’ll never forget what he said to me a few months later: “Jim, I didn’t have enough scripture memorized. Scripture was the only thing that kept the demons at bay.” My friend is not prone to dramatics or lying...in fact, he’s a missionary, and that’s his testimony.

We are always being lied to by the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, but our ability to defend ourselves against the lie will be profoundly impacted by our ability to recall God’s Word.

OK, let me come back to your experience at church when you came under the conviction that you were wrong when you were so convinced that you were right. Sometimes that conviction does not come directly from a particular verse in the Bible, but you hear God speak to you through the application of a principle that comes from the Bible, right? In other words, the Holy Spirit speaks to your circumstances when you hear God’s Word preached, and that message brings light to your circumstances and reveals the truth that you could not otherwise see. Again, the Word of God that Paul is referring to is living and active, so we must always be eager to hear God speak through the teaching of His Word.

As a pastor, I’m constantly amazed at what people hear from God when I preach His Word. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve had a conversation that went something like this: “Oh, Pastor Jim, I’ll never forget when you said _____...that day changed my life. It was exactly what I needed to hear from the Lord. It gave me such clear direction for the challenges I was facing.”

I, of course, always smile and say something like, “Well, praise God!” But here’s the embarrassing truth: so many times I come away from those conversations knowing full well...I never said those words! Believe it or not, even though I’ve preached hundreds of sermons, I can tell if you are quoting me or not. I may not remember everything I’ve ever said, but I’ll immediately recognize something I never said! And here’s what I’ve come to accept: the Holy Spirit often speaks to people through my messages, even when what they hear from God was not

at all what I actually said as the messenger. That is as it should be...the sword is of the Spirit, and so I regularly pray that the Spirit would use me to wield His sword in any way that He sees fit.

Now, what has been true for every other part of God's armor holds true with the sword of the Spirit as well: we must take it up. Although God's word is a gift given to the believer, we are still called to receive it, to take it up, and to engraft the Word of God into our hearts in a way that His Word constantly serves not only as a sword, but also as "a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

As your pastor, I want you to know that the Word of God, and particularly the teachings of Jesus, are inscribed and engrafted into my heart. His words about forgiveness, His words about loving my enemy, His words about who He is and who I am, His prayers to the Father, His instruction to His disciples...all of His words inform my very identity as a human being on planet earth. I rarely make it through an hour, let alone a day when His words are not informing my life, convicting me of sin, and reminding me of His grace. In those times that I lose my way, it is because I have set aside His word in an act of neglect or rebellion...not because I didn't know any better! Even now, after three decades of ministry, I can take up the sword of the Spirit, or I can set it aside. It is a choice that I must make every day, but here's what is clear from Paul's teaching: to set aside the Word of God is to march into battle without a sword. Church, remember, we are never in peace time. The Enemy is relentless, and he does not rest. We need take up the sword of the Spirit if we hope to prevail against the Enemy, which means we must meditate upon God's Word until it becomes a part of who we are. But here's an obvious truth: if you are to sincerely take up the sword of the Spirit, you must first empty your hands of everything else. Again, MacLaren says it better than I ever could:

There are in the Christian ranks some soldiers whose hands are too nerveless or too full of worldly trash to grasp the sword which they have received, much less to strike home with it at any of the evils that are devastating their own lives or darkening their world. The feebleness of the Christian conflict with evil, in all its forms, whether individual or social, whether intellectual or moral, whether heretical or grossly and frankly sensual, is mainly due to the feebleness with which the average professing Christians grasp the sword of the Spirit. If we are wise, we will take the sword that lies in the secret place, and armed with it, we shall not need to fear in any day of battle.³

Church, take up the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, amen?

IV. Engaged in All Prayer

Paul concludes his direction with these words in vss. 18-20: ...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, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Please know that when it comes to spiritual warfare, the actual battle is always fought in prayer. Whether you are praying for someone who is covered up in darkness, or praying for someone's healing, or praying for your own soul when the fiery arrows bear down on your heart, all spiritual warfare requires prayer...and lots of it. Dr. John Stott beautifully speaks to Paul's imperative to pray:

Prevailing Christian prayer is wonderfully comprehensive. It has four universals, indicated by the fourfold use of the word 'all'. We are to *pray at all times* (both regularly and constantly), *with all prayer and supplication* (for it

³ MacLaren, p 380.

takes many and varied forms), *with all perseverance* (because we need like good soldiers to keep alert, and neither give up nor fall asleep), *making supplication for all the saints* (since the unity of God's new society must be reflected in our prayers). Most Christians pray sometimes, with some prayers and some degree of perseverance, for some of God's people. But to replace 'some' by 'all' in each of these expressions would be to introduce a new dimension of prayer.⁴

Many of us think of prayer as a formal, lengthy, magic formula that, if said just right, might earn God's favor for a few hours. Please don't think that way. Prayer involves listening just as much as it does talking. Prayer can take many different forms including speaking to God out loud or silently, but notice Paul says, "pray in the Spirit." There is a double entendre here, and I think Paul meant to leave us with the thought that we should pray in our spirit to the Holy Spirit, and often times that doesn't even involve words.

When I am confronted by a spiritually intense situation, my spirit moves into a place of high attentiveness. I am spiritually awake, alert, and watching closely...always listening to hear the Spirit whisper His will and purpose. Silent, watchful attentiveness is a form of prayer, and when it comes to spiritual warfare, that is probably the most important form of prayer.

Remember on the night that Christ was betrayed, when the hordes of hell were about to descend upon Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told his disciples to stay awake, to be alert, and to watch! Why? Because watchfulness is critical when the Enemy is approaching. That command to 'be watchful' is all over the New Testament because false teachers are like wolves in sheep clothing, and the second coming of Christ will surprise us all like a thief who comes at night...but most of all because we have a tendency to be sleeping when we should be praying! Stott says it well: "Without prayer we are much too feeble and flabby to stand against the might of the forces of evil."⁵

Church, it is by prayer that we gird ourselves with truth, that we put on the breastplate of righteousness, that we don our feet with the gospel of peace, that we take up the shield of faith, that we put on the helmet of salvation, and that we wield the sword of the Spirit. You can do none of these things without prayer...so pray. Keep the lines of communication open with the Lord all day long. Ask Jesus to show you how your situation looks in His eyes. Ask the Father to remind you of His word. Ask Jesus to remind you of who you are. Ask the Holy Spirit to equip you to fight the good fight. And above all, be thankful! Gratitude is another powerful weapon against evil, so spend some time giving thanks for the goodness of God and the joy He has given us in Christ. Remember, the joy of the Lord is our strength...so seek the joy of the Lord in all situations. Finally, let us pray one for another! I know many of you struggle with intercessory prayer because we don't think our prayers are going to change God's mind. If we are praying to change God's mind, are we not putting ourselves over God? Instead, when we intercede for others, let us seek the mind of God, trusting that His judgments are always perfect even when our circumstances are painful. The goal of prayer is not to move mountains; rather we pray to place ourselves in a posture of utter dependence upon God. God is perfectly capable of running the universe without our instruction, commands, or informative essays. He does, however, like to be asked...as does any loving Father. So pray, ask, give thanks, intercede, and know that your prayers are not in vain.

⁴ Stott, p 283.

⁵ Ibid., p 284.

V. Final Words

Paul concludes by asking the Church to pray for him. I LOVE this part of Paul's letter because you see just how vulnerable Paul is, even as one that we admire and hold in such high esteem. Paul was a prisoner for two years. Two years of seclusion. Two years away from his family, his people, his congregations, and the vast majority of his friends. Two years of Satan whispering that he was an utter failure. So Paul says, "Pray also for me..."

Church, pray for your spiritual leaders. Pray for your elders; pray for your pastors; pray for the church staff and our volunteer leaders. We are all doing our best to lead, to teach, to instruct, to make disciples...but we are all vulnerable and we all need prayer. Pray for me, also, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly, to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak.

It is my prayer that this journey through Ephesians has been an encouragement to you. I told Christy that I could start over with Ephesians 1:1 and preach the entire book again, never repeating a single message! We have in no way exhausted this remarkable book of the New Testament, so I hope you will continue to read and study this great letter for many years to come.

So now, as we conclude our journey through Ephesians, let me speak Paul's benediction to his beloved congregation over YOU, my beloved congregation: Peace be to the Church, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. Will you pray with me?





TIM SWEATMAN

