

Scripture for August 1st 2021

Isaiah 52:7-10 (NIV)

⁷ How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

⁹ Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NIV)

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Sermon: “Put on The Whole Armor of God”

Last week we had a team-talk from the coach at half-time, this week we have a rousing message by the general to the troops before they go into battle. The irony is that this general is *in prison*.¹ But that fact alone would not have been seen as discouraging or negative to his readers. Words from iconic leaders and dissidents in jail have often proved inspirational throughout history. After all, the church knew that Jesus himself was killed for proclaiming his message, yet God vindicated him by raising him from the dead.² Whether Paul was alive or dead at that time is not at issue; the writer reminds his readers that *God’s power* is still available to all those “in Christ.”³ The author, then, reemphasizes the theme of *divine power* that he first introduced in chapter 1, and repeated in his prayer of chapter 3, where he said that God’s power will be *in the church* “accomplishing far more than we can ask or imagine.”⁴ Despite God’s power being available to us, we are to actively “put on the whole armor of God.” Today we are going to look at that armor - and at the enemy.

The writer makes it abundantly clear that the church’s enemy *not* human opposition.⁵ Remember, the recipients of this letter were a minority faith group within the Roman empire. Centuries later, when Christendom was established, it became too easy to identify the “other” as the enemy, labelling them as a “heretic” or an “infidel” and so oppress the other in the name of defending “orthodoxy.” In modern times, it has also become too easy to wrap this up in misplaced nationalism, such that a given country’s enemies are portrayed as *God’s enemies* or as “evil.”⁶ Such matters are *not* legitimized from this text, since he identifies the enemy as the devil!⁷ The author uses familiar Jewish apocalyptic language and speaks of: “our struggle being against the cosmic powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”⁸ This, then, is a *spiritual* battle and this topic is often referred to as “spiritual warfare.” When we hear that today, people have various reactions. Some can’t take such rhetoric seriously and dismiss it out of hand. Others revel in the apparent mystery of these powers and have an unhealthy fixation on such dark forces and see them present everywhere!⁹ For example, some vocal pastors have claimed COVID and the government stay-at-home orders are part of a spiritual battle that is targeted at thwarting the church. I would disagree, simply because *everyone* has been caught up

¹ Eph 6:20; 3:1; 4:1. Indeed, it is quite possible that Paul had already been martyred, depending on the authorship. If Paul was alive, there may have been little hope he would be released – depending on the (debated) location of the prison. If not Paul, the writer “borrows” from Paul’s authority to encourage the readers to endure – to “stand firm to the end” (6:13).

² Eph 1:20-23.

³ See Eph 1:5-14.

⁴ See Eph 3:20-21, 7; 2 Cor 10:3-4.

⁵ Eph 6:12 – *not* “flesh and blood.”

⁶ Following Jesus, Christians are to be exemplary *peacemakers*. As spiritual warfare has become sometimes confused with literal warfare. No early Christian took up weapons against their persecutors; many died as martyrs.

⁷ Eph 6:11.

⁸ Eph 6:12. Note that the mention of “ruler” and “authorities” are also non-human. See also Eph 1:20-21; 2:2; 3:10.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, in his introduction to the famous *Screwtape Letters*, observes that the general public either ignore the forces of evil altogether - they pretend they don’t exist and use the cartoon images of the devil with horns and hooves a dismissive argument - and there are others who take an unhealthy interest in anything demonic, which be just as bad in the long run.

in this crisis – it’s *not* specific to the church! What we need, then, is wise discernment and a sober, realistic assessment of struggle that we’re engaged with, and of the armor at our disposal.

I want to pause here and make a couple of comments. Many people acknowledge there is a “spiritual battle” but see it purely as *internal*, rather than external. Consequently, the battle is regarded as mental or psychological, one of temptation or other negative influences, including confusion and ignorance, that can infect the human psyche. There is no denying that internal tension exists in *all* of us.¹⁰ The result is that we generally find it difficult to practice Christianity: we struggle to forgive someone, we forget to pray regularly, we don’t resist temptation very effectively, and we’re not diligent in learning more about the faith. I would go further and say that in this struggle some tend to put themselves down, feel a sense of shame, think that others are more holy than themselves, and generally feel that no one else has the same issues they have. Now, if that is you, be assured that we *all* face the same struggles, and the resulting sense of isolation and aloneness is actually a victory for the powers of evil. We are *not* alone, we are a faith community, and there is added strength by being together. Remember, the armor of God that is later mentioned is *more* than individual armor, though that is important, it is *communal* armor. Now, because of this tendency to see the spiritual battle as internal, there is a failure to recognize our struggles might be part of a *larger* campaign. As I just said, it’s like soldiers fighting in the fog, never seeing - and actually not knowing about - the others not far away in the same line of battle, and so they think that they are alone.¹¹ In fact, in most conflicts, hardly any in the frontline knows much about what’s going on with the rest of the war. That’s the job of the generals. But at least they know that *something* is going on and that they are a part of a larger whole. That’s the perspective that every Christian needs to maintain as we hold our bit of the line against external attack.

So who or what is the “enemy”? This can be approached in various ways, but let me begin by saying that while many today use the word “evil” too flippantly, others want to deny its reality.¹² For me, evil is *power* that is anti-human, anti-creation, and anti-God.¹³ Things that come under that umbrella include: racism, discrimination, oppression of minorities, terrorism and war, genocide, world hunger, child labor and abuse, addictions, phobias, out-of-control consumerism, corporate greed, abuse of power, blind nationalism, and the policies and philosophy’s that result in depersonalization or the willful destruction of God’s good creation, the context of all life. That’s a potent and partial list, and it’s *more* than internal; it is *systemic* and influences us all and no one person or nation can control it. It is an oppressive “power” that affects us and opposes God’s values and kingdom. In the New Testament, this dark power was personified as the devil and his demons. When the church and other groups push back against those real forces of evil, our efforts usually struggle to make headway for various reasons. Not only is there enormous inertia *to* change, those external powers appear to push back and *resist* and

¹⁰ See also Rom 7:14-25.

¹¹ See 1 Kings 18-19 and the story of Elijah’s sense of aloneness.

¹² That denial is often associated with the prior belief/assumption in humankind’s social *progress*, together with a materialistic worldview that denies the spiritual (or spirituality).

¹³ See Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*, (Galilee/Doubleday, 1998) and N. T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, (IVP, 2006).

even *oppose* change. Furthermore, our efforts can be minimized by disunity in the ranks - the church – or because we are so focused internally on ourselves that we have little effort or resources to address these wider issues. And this can lead to frustration and a feeling that this power is *personal* and actively thwarting our efforts. For this reason, some still believe in a personal devil.¹⁴ Let's not get sidetracked into debating the devil's existence; instead, let us acknowledge the *experiential reality* of evil and its power of domination, distraction, and disorder. Let us unmask that power, name it, and recognize it. And let us also embrace the writer's conviction that God's power is vastly greater than that of evil.

To that end, God has provided Christians with the protective armor against evil "attacks."¹⁵ Our response is to equip ourselves for the struggle and to "*stand firm*."¹⁶ Let's consider this armor, and bear in mind that the readers would likely imagine a fully-armed Roman soldier as they heard this list.¹⁷

First, we have to gather our tunic under the armor and fasten it securely with the "belt of truth."¹⁸ I spoke about the importance of truth last week¹⁹; truth matters. Lies, deception, fake news, and conspiracy theories all oppose truth. From a Christian perspective, we also need to be convinced of the truth of the good news of Jesus the Messiah and hence to "seek first the kingdom of God."²⁰ Second, we put on the "breastplate of righteousness."²¹ Our lives are to have integrity and sincerity, because we have been reborn in baptism and are now to be found "in Christ."²² It is our Christian virtues that, like a breastplate, will protect us from a full-frontal attack.²³ Third, our footwear is very important if we are to stand firm.²⁴ Military-style hobnail sandals or short boots are used as the equipment for the gospel of peace, and they suggest readiness for a long march.²⁵ Fourth, is the shield of faith.²⁶ Unlike a small, round shield, this shield was a full-length, leather-covered and water-soaked wooden shield that would have protected the whole body. And it would be used in conjunction with other, similar shields to create a more effective wall of defense for a group of soldiers. Burning arrows had been used in attacks that besiege cities since before the Greek empire. A soldier who became terrified by flaming arrows caught in their shield might throw it down, and then become vulnerable to enemy spears. Stand firm, then, behind that shield of faith when doubts, despair, adverse circumstances, personal tragedy,

¹⁴ See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), p149-153.

¹⁵ Some find this idea of "attack" weird. I suggest that if a church/organization/individual does not experience such resistance or oppression, then it is probably doing nothing of significance to resist or push back against evil in the world.

¹⁶ Eph 6:11, 13-14.

¹⁷ See Eph 6:14-17. Other than the sword, the armor is mainly defensive. See also: Isa 11:4-5; 49:2; 52:7; 59:17; (Wis 5:18–20); these Old Testament echoes are pre-Roman.

¹⁸ Eph 6:14a.

¹⁹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Ethics-Matter.pdf>.

²⁰ Matt 6:33 – "But seek first his kingdom *and his righteousness*, and all these things will be given to you as well."

²¹ Eph 6:14b; 4:24; 5:9; Isa 59:17.

²² God sees us as "righteous" (in right relationship with God) because of Jesus; we are part of the new creation and made in God's image. See [18]. Righteousness is also closely linked to *justice*; the breastplate protects the just nature of the cause.

²³ In 1 Thess 5:8, the breastplate is of "love and faith," again two virtues (or gifts of the Spirit). Watch your *back* too!

²⁴ Eph 6:15.

²⁵ See also Rom 10:15; Isa 52:7. The "gospel of peace" is also the unity of Jews and non-Jews in Christ; Eph 2:14, 17.

²⁶ Eph 6:16; see Ps 5:12; 18:30; Isa 50:11.

and temptation arise - or even following a triumph that tempts you to arrogance and pride. Fifth, maintain perspective with the metal helmet of salvation.²⁷ Those who experience hardships know the *mental* battle is just as important as the physical, sometimes more so. Hold on with confidence to our new identity “in Christ” as the battle rages. This is another reason that Christian *maturity* matters, as I mentioned last week, and hence why diligent study and spiritual disciplines are important. Sixth, we are to take hold of that short “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”²⁸ The “word of God” here is *not* the Bible! It is the Spirit-inspired, verbal proclamation of the gospel message. And, curiously, that’s the only *attacking* weapon there is in our armor! In brief, the general’s message is *having put on God’s armor, keep alert, stand firm, persevere, hold the line.*²⁹

Equipment evidently matters! Now, unless you have had some military experience, that image of armor might not resonate with you personally, enough though we all can appreciate the metaphor. If it’s helpful, consider instead the specialized clothing and equipment of a hiker or a mountain climber. They need the right footwear, clothing, backpack, etc., and a preparedness for any weather. Consider too the clothing and equipment of Olympic athletes; every little thing matters to give the best advantage for success.

The writer of Ephesians gives one more instruction: “Pray in the Spirit at all times.”³⁰ And pray not just for yourself, but for others too. This is not merely a prayer for protection and for strength to persevere, though that is appropriate,³¹ but also for effectiveness in retelling the gospel story.³² Through prayer we are *consciously* inviting *God* to partner with *us* in our situation, and reminding ourselves and others that we need God’s help. Conversely, prayer also reminds *us* that *we* are actively partnering *with* God and *his* mission, and that we are *trusting* God for his provision. The strength we need, then, not only arises from our *internal* mental and emotional wellness, but *externally* from the divine Spirit and from the *community* of which we are a part. It’s unwise to omit the last two and try to go it alone!

I have spoken on prayer a number of times, and this is not the time to repeat all that. Let me just say that while prayer is practical, it remains a mysterious thing and we don’t know “how it works,” so to speak. It’s *not* a magic formula, though some people think it is, and then wonder what’s the point when they don’t get the outcome they desire! Some people have noticed that when we pray, surprising “coincidences” can sometimes happen, and when prayers aren’t said we will probably not notice such occurrences!³³ Prayer, as you know, is deemed a spiritual *discipline*; “pray at all times” means the

²⁷ Eph 6:17a. In 1 Thess 5:8, the helmet is described as the “hope of salvation”; see also [21].

²⁸ Eph 6:17b. See also Phil 1:12–14.

²⁹ Eph 6:11, 13, 18b; Phil 4:13.

³⁰ Eph 6:18 (cf. Col 4:2–4), He ends the letter as he began, with prayer: Eph 1:15–23 (see also Eph 3:14–21). See also 1 Thess 5:17; Phil 1:4; 4:6.

³¹ See Rom 8:26, and see also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), chapter 8.

³² Everyone who has tried to pass on the gospel message, including every preacher, knows that sense of inadequacy for the task, wondering what of the right words to say, how can we make it clear and understandable, convincing and compelling. Paul says the same thing. Prayer itself is not mentioned as a particular piece of armor, but certainly it is needed!

³³ James tells us that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” Jas 5:16. For “righteous person” see [21].

persistent practice of praying, rather than the odd prayer here or there.³⁴ In addition to putting on God's armor, be continually *engaged* in prayer, says the writer. That doesn't automatically mean those prayers will be effective at *releasing* someone like Paul from prison, but it will help a person continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus without fear of the consequences.³⁵ There is therefore realism in these prayers. Yes, the evil, hostile powers are resisting and interfering with the progress of the kingdom of God, but the writer is utterly convinced that God will ultimately prevail.³⁶ For the moment we wrestle with the powers in the strength of Christ and the Spirit.³⁷ I said at the beginning that, like a general rallying the troops, the writer reminds his readers that *God's* power will be *in the church* "accomplishing far more than we can ask or imagine."³⁸ Nevertheless, if we are to hold the line, we are all to actively "put on the whole armor of God." And then we watch, pray, and remain alert – for we live in challenging times. Amen. Let us pray.

³⁴ Though a gracious God hears and responds to those kinds of prayers too! Remember, Jesus modelled the life of prayer and see also [33].

³⁵ Eph 6:19-20. (If this letter was written *after* Paul's martyrdom, it is a further rally cry to endure to the end; Eph 6:13.)

³⁶ I have spoken before on the "now and not yet" kingdom of God. See also Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 6.

³⁷ As it says in Rev 2:7a, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

³⁸ See Eph 3:20-21, 7; 2 Cor 10:3-4.