

Part 14: The Means to Stand Firm

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Today we have the privilege of concluding our series in the book of Ephesians, and next week we start a new series in the book of Deuteronomy. I love finishing books of the Bible, because I just like you, grow to appreciate the book all the more as we spend time diving into it together.

So I would encourage you this week to sit down, and it will take you about 20-30 minutes, and read all of Ephesians as a unity. See if you see in the book a greater picture of what Paul is doing. At this point I would hope that if you are someone who finds the Christian gospel and the Christian life to be something boring or lackluster, that you have found instead this to be the most profoundly powerful truth you can know. Paul's whole point in this book is to occupy your minds with the beauty of Jesus so that it affects every part of your life as part of God's church. That is what it means to have, as our series is titled, a beautiful occupation.

This is going to be very true today as we read Paul's concluding words to the church in Ephesus. Last week Paul did a great deal of work to convince us that we are in the middle of a war. The greatest need you have in this life is not success by worldly standard. The greatest need you have in this world is to endure the fight for your soul.

Now it's not a very fair fight, for the power of the gospel is nothing compared to the power of sin. But Paul's point is that if a Christian is to be a Christian, they must stand firm against Satan's attacks. They must not assume that the gospel is a pill to be taken once which makes everything perfect. Instead, the gospel is the very power of God which is for us, and that wonderful power will also endure us even when life gets difficult. The life of a Christian is a daily reality of drawing on the wonder of the God who saved us.

I heard a preacher use an illustration of a man who once saw a moth trying to escape its cocoon. The man watched as the moth struggled a seemingly endless struggle as he tried to wriggle his way out of an opening a fraction the size of its body.

So the man went and got a small pair of scissors and snipped the cocoon so that the moth would be free of its struggle. The moth appeared grateful as it spread out its shriveled wings, but the salvation was fleeting. The man noticed that the moth's wings never fully spread out and that it spent the next few weeks dragging its hulking body across the ground instead of flying as it ought.

He did some research and learned that the hole of the cocoon was designed to be so small that it would force the bodily fluids into the wings so that they would be made strong enough to fly. His attempt to remove the struggle from the life of the moth proved to be the moth's downfall.

I think in the western church we look for clippers on every corner. Because our world is so success driven, so occupied with immediacy, we seek to avoid anything which causes struggle or calls for us to endure anything for an extended period of time.

But in this remaining text, Paul is writing to Christians preparing them for the struggle which will ultimately endure them. The text which was just read for us should make two things abundantly clear. First, the life of a Christian is a life of war. But second, God in his mercy has equipped us with exactly what we need to make it through this battle.

But before we get into this text today, I want you to know that Paul is writing to Christians. He is writing to people who have been made alive by their faith in Jesus Christ. Meaning this, that the armor that we are going to look at today are free gifts given to us by grace, not pieces of a puzzle that we must gather if we want to be saved.

We cannot fight our way into salvation, but we can fight inside of our salvation. That's what Paul is after in this text. The truths of this text are things given freely to you by God because of his love for believers.

So to those who feel confident, know that you have nothing strong in you except what is given to you by God. To those who feel weak, know that there is nothing in your heart or in your world stronger than the strength God has given you in Jesus.

With that said we are going to look at this armor of God today, these gifts which Paul wants you to take advantage of in your fight of faith. And what we are going to see today are two categories for the disciple: **The attitudes of a Christian soldier** and **The armaments of the Christian soldier**.

So what I'm going to do is read the whole passage for us this morning and then we will dive in: **Ephesians 6:14-24**.

When I was in high school there was a teacher who used to be a security guard at an inner city mall in Chicago. While he was there he learned to constantly be ready for a fight. This level of preparedness came with him even when he began teaching at a private Christian school. Because of this, one of our favorite pastimes was to try and scare him, because what would happen is when you scare him you would see two things simultaneously happen.

First, he would widen his feet, lower his shoulders, and cock his fists back prepared to swing. Second, he would quickly realize that he was about to punch a 16 year old student in the face and he would have to clumsily stop his attack mid-swing.

In verses 14-15, Paul is prescribing his first three pieces of armor and his point is that we too as Christians would have the same attitude of preparedness in our hearts. That we would be ready, at a moment's notice to fight the fight of faith. These are the **Attitudes of a Christian Soldier**.

As Paul progresses through this list, he walks through the pieces of armor in the same order that one would put them on. And because of that these first three pieces are the essential expectations we have as believers.

In calling us to stand firm Paul calls us to put on the belt of truth. And here we see that believers must have an attitude **shaped by truth**.

Included in this idea of truth is certainly God's written word to us, but this isn't the only meaning as Paul later comes back to the word as its own piece of armor.

Now out of all the pieces of armor, this is the one least clamored for in Sunday School. Even shoes can be made to look more practical than a belt.

But in the Roman infantry, and in Paul's prescription to Christians, this small piece would have been of first importance. Most soldiers wore tunics so when the time to fight came, they would "gird their loins." Meaning they would bind up their tunic into their belt and their belt would hold it up so that they could move unencumbered.

Failing to gird themselves as such would risk, quite literally, a soldier getting caught with his pants down on the battle field: tripped up and vulnerable in his own clothes. When Paul is calling for a belt of truth he is calling for an attitude towards God which allows us to move freely.

I've played in lots of outdoor tournaments over the years from flag football, to basketball and to volleyball. And if you've ever played in one of those you might know the struggle of competing whistles. Typically the courts are so close together that anytime a whistle blows regardless of whose court it is on, there is a potential to pause and wonder if that whistle belongs to your court official or not. It can be quite difficult to play through it at times.

This is how encumbered we can be in life if we do not learn to hear the supremacy of the whistle of God's truth. To use modern language, this shows the need for a gospel-centered world view. Our understanding of all things are held up in our understanding of God's things.

Christians by nature admit that there is a God and he is not me. Which means two things, that this God, this creator is truth himself. Everything is filtered through his truth. And secondly, that if I admit that this God is true, then in order for my life to be shaped by truth I need to continually submit my will to his will.

Look at what Paul has already said in: **Ephesians 5:8-10** and also in **Philippians 4:8-9**.

The need for the disciple is not, as culture would prescribe, to be true to oneself, but to be true to God. If we are constantly confused by the other whistles in life we will quickly be tripped up. But a Christian soldier is quick to ask themselves in all things: "What does God think of this?"

Next Paul calls us to put on the breastplate of righteousness in Ephesians 6:14. Now one of Paul's favorite things to talk about is the righteousness of Jesus. Our greatest problem is that we are unrighteous, that we do not match up to God's perfect standard. But when Jesus came, Jesus lived the righteous life, he obeyed God and loved others perfectly.

And when we have faith in Jesus, we get Jesus' righteousness. Our righteousness doesn't cut it, but Jesus' does. This is what leads Paul to say this in **Romans 3:21-24**. We are saved by Jesus' righteousness and not our own.

However, most commentators don't think that this is what Paul is talking about here. For one simple reason: Paul is writing to Christians, and you can't be a Christian without having this righteousness. The righteousness of God given to us in Jesus is not an optional piece of armor, it is the foundation of Christianity itself.

In this verse Paul isn't talking about an understanding of Jesus' righteousness, instead is an application of Jesus' righteousness to the life of a believer. Those who have been covered by Jesus' good and righteous work now set their lives to pursue good and righteous work.

Meaning that the second attitude we should have is one **Shaped by a zeal for godly living**.

What's interesting here is that Paul's allegory of defensive armor is in reality an active commitment to righteous living. One of the best ways to curb the allure of sin is to have our hearts covered by a healthy attraction to godly living.

In other words when it comes to resisting Satan and sin, Paul says don't just avoid porn, but also go share the gospel with your neighbor. Don't just put away hate, but go serve at Family Promise. Don't just run from competing world views, but take up Bible reading and prayer.

If you want to endure against the devil then do not give into the lie of passivity. If you want to endure as a believer, make yourself busy with pursuing godliness. It's hard to be busy with the lies of sin when we are preoccupied with a godly life. Look at what the Proverbs say: **Proverbs 6:9-11**. Paul already made a similar point in **Ephesians 2:10**. And notice the same emphasis he gives to his disciple Titus in **Titus 2:13-14**.

We must have an attitude of submission to God's truth, a zeal for good works, and lastly we see an attitude **Shaped by Gospel readiness**. Look again at **Ephesians 6:15**.

Unlike today, most wars in the time of Paul were fought on foot. And the swifter you were able to move on foot, the more advantageous you were in the battle.

If you've ever attended a graduation ceremony, you've heard a public reading of Dr. Seuss' "Oh the Places You'll Go." "Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away! | You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go. | You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care. About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there." With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down any not-so-good street."

This book captures one truth about the gospel well: it will carry you places you never expected to go. But it also misses out on a couple important expectations Paul wants you to have.

First, when you are saved by Jesus you relinquish the right to "steer yourself any direction you choose." When the gospel grips your heart you pick up your cross and follow Jesus. Gospel readiness understands that Jesus' plans are greater and more joyful than our plans.

Gospel readiness also assumes that sometimes you will be carried to "the not so-good street." Paul says, these shoes they may march you into the enemy's teeth, but look on your feet it's the gospel of peace.

What a strange tension? That during times of war, in the face of the devil's attack, we are made ready with the gospel of peace. Even when we run into war itself we might have peace that the gospel has solved our greatest need.

John Piper had a wonderful quote which has stuck in my brain which gets at this readiness and peace: "Let the lions roar and let the swords swing, for we will have resurrection bodies."

Because Jesus died for us, we now live and move without fear of the world. We may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but we are ready for it. We may move forward in risky, cross-cultural evangelism for the sake of the lost, but we will be ready and willing to face those challenges.

You see a Christian so occupied with God's truth and God's work is willing to lose the ground of the world in order to gain ground in the Kingdom of heaven. Are you ready to be carried into war by this gospel? Where has it taken you today? Where are the places in your life where the readiness of this gospel is roaring inside of you to be let loose?

Consider the prophet Isaiah: **Isaiah 52:7**.

When Paul calls us to stand firm in the fight for faith, we are beginning to see that there is nothing static about this stand. It is dynamic, it moves under the banner of truth, lives under the protection of righteousness and runs with gospel readiness. I think for many of you the challenge to stand firm to starts with the call to get moving.

Paul says, it's time to get dressed.

Because it's only when we expect these things, only when we have become dressed in these attitudes does Paul call us to pick up our tools. And this is where we go next **The Armaments of a Christian Soldier**. What does Paul want us to arm ourselves with? Let's read: **Ephesians 6:16**.

Here we see the first thing Paul wants us to take up: **Take up Faith**.

Now Paul's metaphor is that faith is a shield. When we think of shields we might be prone to think of smaller shields like a Viking or medieval knight. But a Romans shield covered ones whole body. So it's an apt analogy for a faith that covers all of our life.

In the Romans phalanx there was nothing more practical to a soldier than his shield. And here Paul wants you to understand that the most practical piece of weaponry you have is your faith in Jesus Christ.

For most of us faith is an afterthought. It's as if we put our faith in Jesus, and that's as far as faith goes. But here Paul is saying that faith is not something which is at one point given away, but something which is daily relied upon.

And there is this reality in his text which I really want us to understand. You dear Christian, should expect your faith to be tested. It is in Paul's analogy the item which takes the most beating. Don't be surprised when this happens.

Eve was surprised in the garden. Satan came and asked Eve what God said, and began to take little lapses of understanding and twisted it into full on rebellion. The smallest amount of faith in Jesus is sufficient to save us, but as a growing soldier where are you making efforts to grow in this faith?

Where are you learning more and more about the hope of this salvation? The true doctrines about this God? Look at what the author of Hebrews says: **Hebrews 11:1-3**.

This kind of faith is not blind faith, it is faith shaped by the attitude of truth that we spoke of earlier. Coming to church and reading your Bible are great ways to grow this faith, but I would encourage you to also join a Community Group. It is those groups where we actually get to encourage each other in the realities of life when our faith is bludgeoned by the battle.

We cannot think too much of Jesus and we can't help others think too much about him either. This is how the author of Hebrews closed his section on faith: **Hebrews 12:1-2**. Learn about this object and rest in the might of that faith even when it seems the world wages war against it.

Next Paul lumps two pieces of armor under the same command: **Ephesians 6:17**.

Here we see Paul wants us to **Take up salvation and God's word**.

Now again, Paul can't possibly mean take salvation as for the first time, for one cannot be a Christian without salvation, and we are unable to take salvation on our own apart from the free gift of grace.

But just as a helmet protects the most exposed part of us, so too is salvation a hope in our exposure. And it is here that you begin to see how these armaments are working together. When our faith is challenged, we remember our salvation in Jesus Christ, and when our salvation is on the top of our mind, our faith is strengthened.

How many times when you face trials or temptations do you actually consider your salvation? This is a little different than just reflecting on your faith right? Reflecting on our faith reflects on all the things we hold true in Christ, but reflecting on your salvation reminds you of the result of faith: we have been saved, **1 Thessalonians 5:8**.

This is what Paul is after in **Romans 8:37-39**. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you share in his victory. You have already been delivered from the threat of your sin which means that everything else you face in this world is nothing compared to what Jesus already faced for you.

When the devil wages war with sin in your heart or pain in your life, remind yourself of this: "I have been saved in Jesus Christ." One component of helmets during the time of Paul was the decorative plume which stood on top of it. The colors of that plume indicated the colors under which you fought, and your status in the army. We Christians fight under the banner and color of a salvation given to us by Jesus himself.

How do we know this? When the world wages war against us? Because the Spirit himself reminds us of all these things in God's word. The only offensive weapon given by Paul is the word of God, which is not just God's word, but the work of God's Spirit.

In other words when you learn to rely on God's word you are relying on the very Spirit of God himself. What a powerful help in times of trouble. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert, it wasn't miracles which sustained him, it was God's word. Three times Jesus quoted God's word to ward off the temptations of the devil.

Theologian John frame says: "A gun will subdue a man, but only the word of God's word will subdue Satan."

Make yourself familiar with your salvation by making yourself familiar with God's word. If you've never really read God's word, read it with another member in here, or get a good study Bible and use the notes to help you grasp what it is saying.

We wouldn't take a knife to a gunfight and we therefore wouldn't attempt to endure without God's word.

There is one final thing which Paul wants to call you to in your effort to stand firm, and that is prayer. Paul's final plea for the church is that in all things you would **Take up prayer**.

Read with me: **Ephesians 6:18-20**.

J.C. Ryle, 19th century pastor once wrote: **I have heard it said that some people who grind metal sometimes wear a magnetic mouthpiece at their work, which catches all the fine metal dust that flies around them, prevents it from entering their lungs, and so saves their lives. Prayer is the mouthpiece that you must wear continually, or else you will never work uninjured by the unhealthy atmosphere of this sinful world. You must pray.**

Do you see prayer as essential as Paul makes it out to be?

I love this emphasis because the metaphor falls away here. There is no piece of armor associated with Paul's call to pray and I think that we often feel that. We think that these other pieces are more exciting and more useful, but Paul's conclusion here stresses the opposite: you won't make it if you're not prayerful.

And not just for you personally. Paul stresses the corporate nature of prayer. Not only will you not make it if you are prayerless, but the church won't make it if the church is prayerless.

One might read through these pieces of armor and feel a false sense of individuality, like you can fight this mess on your own. But in these closing verses Paul reminds us of two things: prayer shows you need God and prayer shows you need God's people.

We need God himself and God's church in our fight to endure and prayer is essential to both of those. Paul, the one writing this passage asks for help at the end. He knows that even though he wears this same armor, it is not enough if he is prayerless and if the church is prayerless.

God works through prayer. God wants you to pray for your fellow believers in Missoula and around the globe. I want to invite you to practice this on Tuesday as you come and hear about what the Lord is doing in Uganda. How would our city and our world look if the church regularly practiced such boldly evangelistic prayers?

But there is also one other thing I want us to see as Paul closes this book. Look back at **Ephesians 6:18-20**.

In all the language about fighting, standing and suiting up. We need to understand what a successful gospel fight looks like. What does it look like to be so occupied with Jesus that you stand firm victoriously?

The author of Hebrews gives an amazing tribute to the heroes of faith but concludes by saying: "These all died..." Stephen took up prayer mightily in Acts 7, but the stones of the crowd still killed him. William Tyndale treasured God's word mightily and gave his life to make it available to others, but he was still martyred for translating it into common language.

In the face of these stories what real hope does this armor offer against the struggles of this world?

Well consider Paul in this text. Consider where he got the idea for this metaphor of armor. Here Paul is, in prison, chained most likely to a Roman guard. And when considering how to call us to fight the Christian fight of faith, he looks up and sees the armor on the guard who is holding him captive and says, "Ah, this will work quite nicely."

You see the beauty of the gospel is that prisoners can claim armor. When we submit our lives to the plan of God to unite all things in Jesus, we realize that we will look like failures in the eyes of the world. But the call of the Christian isn't to reach worldly rewards, but heavenly ones. As Paul said in Ephesians 6:13, that when all is said and done, that we would have stood firm.

And in those moments we remember two things: that we have a church praying and fighting with us and we have a Jesus who has promised to endure us.