

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

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Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

Ephesians 6:10-20

CHOOSE YOUR EQUIPMENT

We are a people blessed to have many choices about where to live, how to use our time, what to eat, how to vote, and also about aspects of living a life of faith. When the Hebrew people had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, they spent the next forty years in the wilderness before they entered what they called the promised land. During the difficulties of those forty years, they basically had two choices about what to believe – they could believe that God was going to provide for them during the challenges of living in almost desert-like conditions or that they were on their own and if they managed to keep from starving to death, it would be by a combination of their wiles and good luck. But when they did in fact move into the promised land described as a land of milk and honey, they had a third choice – they could believe in the gods of the people who had been living in the land, who offered sacrifices to all kinds of gods who they thought provided them with fertility, success, and health. In this context, their leader, Joshua, challenges the Hebrews to choose whom they would serve. Would they serve the idols made up of stone or wood that they could see or would they serve the unseen God who had delivered them from slavery and brought them through the difficulties of a wilderness experience, enabling them to get established in a new land? It was not a choice as to whether to be a master of a deity or deities, it was a choice of which belief system to serve.

Based on this kind of choice, the book of Ephesians uses armor imagery that people of faith might choose how to equip their lives if they chose to serve the Lord. These people who lived on the coast of ancient Greece had been exposed to the armor worn by Roman soldiers, as New Testament documents were written in the midst of the height of the oppressive, totalitarian Roman Empire, and there was a presence of these soldiers throughout the Mediterranean region. Those soldiers served Caesar, who declared himself a god. In order to lord it over others, the soldiers were well-equipped with armor and weapons.

Each soldier would wear a toga, held up by a belt, so the warrior would not be tripped up. A breastplate covered the core of the body, protecting from arrows or swords. Shoes would be worn that would allow the soldier to move quickly across a variety of terrains. A shield would be held, a bit larger than was needed to protect the one who carried it, as soldiers would march together shoulder to shoulder with their shields overlapping to have the maximum protection from flaming arrows. A helmet was worn to protect from getting whacked on the head. All of that was defensive in nature. Soldiers also typically each had a sword, which could be used for offensive or defensive purposes.

For an early church that felt like it was embattled or under siege, it was quite natural for this kind of armor to be used metaphorically in this epistle. These Christians felt the threat of persecution that was taking the lives of people of faith who would not kneel to Caesar. What was suggested as beneficial in their situation was not any kind of physical armor, however, because the physical threat actually was not the most serious one. What was suggested was that they put on spiritual armor.

I admit that I am a little uneasy with the use of military imagery in matters of faith because it has at times led to a crusade kind of mentality. I grew up singing, “Onward, Christian Soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.”¹ But we do better in understanding the purpose of that armor imagery if we look back through what came earlier in this letter to the early church. There is no interest in a literal Christian conquest. Neither is there any goal of dividing people into those to be loved and those to be scorned. In fact, there is great emphasis on reconciliation, the overcoming of barriers that divide people, religiously or otherwise. We are Christians - the One who leads us is the One who teaches us to love and pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to forgive those who wrong us. This Christ agenda controls the armor imagery, rather than the imagery controlling a Christian agenda.

This imagery does help us in coming to grips with the reality that there are forces at work which stand in direct opposition to the good news that defines our lives and faith. We can put aside the notion that we won’t encounter challenges because we are children of God. There are destructive powers fueled by fear and hatred which are bigger and stronger than any one of us. But God provides us with certain gifts, not really serving as an exterior armor to keep us untouched by any risk, but which

make for a kind of under armor, to use a company name. This is in no way an imagery of self-reliance. Rather it totally focuses on our utter dependance upon the God who equips us.

The nature of this protective armor gives us a sense as to the nature of the threat we face as people of faith. The belt of truth would keep us from getting tripped up by lies and half-truths. In a hateful quest for power, truth can be one of the first casualties. Earlier in Ephesians, “speaking the truth in love” (4:15) was urged as a way to grow in Christ’s ways. Next mentioned is that which guards the heart, the breastplate of righteousness, where we realize our righteousness is based on God’s gracious actions, not our own. The shoes are those which enable us to move freely in order to share the good news of God’s peace, a peace that goes deeper than a lack of war, to the wholeness of relationships between humanity and God. The shield of faith can protect from assaults from those who think there is nothing larger than themselves worth believing in, and a reminder that we are to go forward rather than just stay where we have been. The helmet of salvation imagined for one’s head calls us to remember God’s saving work in our lives, protecting the place of our thoughts that otherwise could take us off in all directions. The last item in the imagery is the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word that comes to us. It is not an instrument with which to hurt others – not in the least. Rather, this item reminds us that Christians are called not just to endure and resist the challenges that come our way, but also to cut through the structures of injustice, the barriers that divide, making full use of the liberating good news that comes from God.

To put an exclamation mark on how we are to rely on God, the armor imagery moves into some exhortations about prayer. Praying for ourselves and for others, as we face the challenges before us, gives us the means for a constant searching for God’s power to be active in and through our lives. Active praying can help to provide the solid spirituality that further equips us to more closely follow Christ’s agenda that has nothing to do with some kind of Christian triumphalism.

As we face various challenges, the gifts that God provides for us lift us and empower us as we seek to apply God’s healing initiative not only to our own lives but also to the world around us. Our hope is not in something physical that we place over our bodies. Rather our hope is in Someone who works within and through people of faith to bring about a change beyond what the soldiers of any

empire ever could. Choose this day whom you will serve. As you choose to serve the Lord, you will be equipped by the commander in chief above to face the challenges of each day as we seek to express the glorious reign of the one true God who we have come to know through Jesus Christ. All glory, honor and power be to our God, now and forevermore. Amen.

¹ Sabine Baring-Gould, 1865, words copyrighted by J. Curwen and Sons.

