

WOUNDED SOLDIERS

*“My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

It has seemed to many who have tried to follow Christ, down through the ages, that this passage – and this particular phrase within this passage – contains one of the most important principles of the entire Christian Life. Having said that, it sounds terribly obvious. To build and further God’s Kingdom among us, didn’t Jesus Himself keep choosing ways the world thinks of as “weakness”? We never hear of His ordering people around; twisting any arms; forcing or trying to coerce people into following Him, or into doing something they were unwilling to do even after they had chosen to follow Him. This would not be remarkable if Jesus were in fact a weak character – if He had no purpose, or passion, or goals of His own. If Jesus were not trying to accomplish anything – content merely to survive here, or to live off of other people – then we might better understand His strange way of going at things – His apparent “weakness.” Ultimately, of course, though we try and try to escape it, Jesus went to the Cross rather than take up arms or bully, force, or try to coerce anybody. Only years later did we begin to notice that it was not, in fact, a powerless Way. He ran on a different kind of power – an unearthly kind of power. And as His people spread across the Empire – not forced but drawn, not threatened but grateful and elated – the strange “weakness” of Christ turned out to be the strongest force on earth. For reasons hard for us to fathom, winning hearts and changing lives have greater impact in the long run than controlling people’s behavior. So in fact, Christianity is never about being powerless. It is about choosing a different power. Only, we cannot choose a different power without abandoning the old power. So we often talk about powerlessness, surrender, a narrow gate, and endless other similar images. But we are not as selfless as we sometimes make it sound. The “weakness” is genuine, from a certain perspective. But the power that draws us is far, far greater than anything we are leaving behind.

Because Jesus’ story and His message have so often been diluted, abandoned, or betrayed, even by sincere followers, His truth is not very clear to many people in our time. Who among us does not wonder, from time to time, if we ourselves have it very clear? But always there are

pockets of people on earth who still choose Jesus and His WAY – not perfectly, but in earnest. They continue to discover the mysterious “weakness” afresh, but usually not until they have spent considerable time in the new life – time letting the Holy Spirit, rather than their own egos, desires, or fears, govern and direct their lives.

Paul, despite some strangely perverted press in our time, spent the years after his conversion tuning his life more and more toward the Spirit and presence of Jesus. He trusted his own prowess less and less, as he trusted Christ’s power more and more ... until he came to the distilled awareness in today’s Scripture reading. Our society studies Christianity so little that many people today think that if a person is humble, it means they are easily controlled. Not at all. If a person is humble, it means they trust God instead of themselves. Though they lack confidence in their own wisdom and prowess, their confidence in God’s wisdom and prowess has grown exponentially. So Luther, a truly humble man, can stand against Pope and Emperor in a time when neither possibility seemed conceivable. They are increasingly furious that Luther will not recant – and not on the grounds of faith or reason, but on the grounds of their authority and right to coerce and control him. Luther stands because his humility is before God, not before them. His confidence is not in himself; in fact, he is terrified on a human level. But neither is his confidence any longer in Pope or Emperor once he realizes that they do not, in fact, revere God. It is, then, his very humility that makes him steel and flint before Pope and Emperor. “Here I stand, I can do no other. Gott helffen mir!”

This is not an aberration of Christendom; it is a theme that runs wide and strong throughout the Christian story – throughout all Christian history. If we are the followers of Christ, we are at times and in many ways at odds with – at war with – the world around us and its ways. If we are followers of Jesus, then like Jesus, we are in warfare against sin, darkness, despair, Satan – against a world that has no genuine allegiance to its Creator. All around us are people saying, and living it out: I can do what I want, when I want to, because I live in the land of the free and the home of the spoiled and self-indulgent; I do not owe allegiance to anything beyond my own best ideas of what’s right, and I reserve the right to seek my own success in whatever ways seem to me most likely to win it.

But the truth for us is that we belong to Christ. Our lives are put at His disposal. Our disciplines are chosen and kept because we want more and more to be responsive to His will and WAY. If we want one thing and it becomes clear to us that He wants another, we trust His wisdom beyond our own, and we willingly subvert our desires to His guidance.

I am only leading up to what has long been obvious to most of you: As long as we are alive in this world, we are in a great battle. Some of the battle is with our own human nature. Some of the battle is with forces and precepts around us that do not match what we understand as the truth of Christ. As Paul says, *“We even fight to capture every thought, until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.”* (II Corinthians 10:5) In any case, we are in a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between self-will and God’s will, between love and hatred, between Satan and the Holy Spirit. It is often lumped together in the phrase, “spiritual warfare.” If you do not see or notice the spiritual warfare going on all around you, you are indeed spiritually asleep. It follows that you probably have little awareness of how much you need the presence of Jesus with you all the time. Many of us do not awaken – and join Christ’s army – until we are wounded by the warfare we did not fully notice.

In any case, since New Testament times, these realities have often been expressed in military concepts and phrases. The analogy is troublesome to many and annoying to some, and it simply does not feel right to many of my friends. Mariana is always put off by the old hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” I sang it too much as a kid to dislike it now, but she doesn’t like its attitude, or its tune. No doubt about it: The analogy of warfare has been sadly and badly abused, mostly by people who forget that it is an analogy and switch from spiritual warfare to physical warfare and march off to kill the infidels in the name of Christ. “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” How easily we switch from His purposes to ours – and change all the methods and approaches along with the change in purpose – often without hardly even noticing we’ve done it. But a tiny flaw does not keep me from loving “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” either.

So the language of warfare – and thinking of ourselves as soldiers of Christ – is indeed dangerous to the unwary. On the other hand, it is very clarifying and helpful, if we do not get careless. *“Put on the whole armor of God”* (Ephesians 6:11-18) *“Let us then cast off the*

works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” (Romans 13:12) “Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” (II Timothy 2:3) “To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.” (Philemon 1:2) “The weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” (II Corinthians 10:4) “This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience” (I Timothy 1:18-19)

Am I boring you? The language of the New Testament is replete with images of war and warfare. And I have not even mentioned the Book of Revelation. So we do need to be careful not to confuse spiritual warfare with physical warfare. On the other hand, if we try to avoid the rightful warfare of the Christian Life – whether it is inside or outside the church, or whether it is inside or outside our own selves – then we cannot follow Christ beyond the point where we or a friend, relative, or fellow church member dislike it or are troubled by it. What’s more, we cannot follow Christ beyond the point where Satan dislikes it. If we are not better soldiers of Christ than that, then we might as well hang it up and go home. (Where, we might add, Satan can beat our heads in at his leisure.)

I want to switch back now, if I can, to one of the deepest principles of our warfare. The one Paul is making really clear in our Scripture passage today. And most specifically, to the key phrase: *“My power is made perfect in weakness.”* Paul is quoting the reply he received when, in sincere prayer, he asked Jesus to please remove his “thorn in the flesh.” Doubtless Paul mentioned that it would be easier for him to carry on his work if Jesus would take away this problem. But the reply is: *“My grace is sufficient for you.”* People like to claim that when they pray, God sometimes says no. But God does not say no to Paul. The reply is full of some of the most important affirmations of the Christian Life. *“My power is made perfect in weakness.”* Let us be very clear, then: It is Christ’s power that is made perfect in Paul’s weakness. I know that is obvious and clear to many of you. I also know that it is still fuzzy and vague to some of you. If we are to be part of Christ’s army – good soldiers of Jesus Christ – we dare not let it remain vague or fuzzy. Jesus cannot use our strength ... until it is broken. You will like it better if I say, “until

it is redeemed.” That’s fine too. If you think it can be redeemed without getting broken, dream on.

One of my favorite phrases – and I apologize for being unable to reference its source – nevertheless, one of my favorite phrases, because for me it epitomizes and summarizes the very principle we are looking at, is: In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight. That phrase sends chills up my spine. I have come to believe it completely. But I have not always loved or believed this principle. When I was younger, I wanted very much to be a famous pastor and preacher. I wanted to be one of Christ’s top Lieutenants; Captain or General would be even better. I wanted to be a hero of the faith, a great warrior in Christ’s cause. You cannot have images like that without trying to lead from your strength – without trying to become stronger and more proficient and more effective in your own right. You cannot have images like that without trying to hide your weaknesses – without trying to get over them in secret before anybody notices. The burden of being good and perfect gets heavier and heavier; after all, one slip – one error – will ruin it all. When we cannot in fact live up to the hero image, after a while there is nothing for it but to pretend.

It seems for a while that perhaps some good is coming from all our immense effort. In *my* case it was immense effort, whether you can imagine that or not. If we look hard enough, we can always find evidence that things are happening, that we are making it – at least that we are on the way. The world around us is able, sometimes, to see our gifts, and to honor and reward them. We can achieve a certain amount of human success. But I wanted to be a commander in Christ’s army – make Him proud of me; win His admiration and approval; do great deeds for Him. Forty-six years later, I am very honored and very pleased if He doesn’t kick me out of the army entirely. I no longer have a desire to be a commander, or a hero. Yet I love Him, and His army, far more than I ever did when I was younger. None of those dreams came true, yet what I really wanted – and really cared about – has come into my life far beyond anything I ever formerly imagined.

What has changed? Just this: I know now that in Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight. *“The well have no need of a physician.”* (Matthew 9:12-13) His power is made perfect in our weakness. How does that happen? Let’s review it.

Some of you have heard me say it many times: Our greatest strengths – our best abilities and gifts – are also our greatest potential detriments. Show me a person who is loyal, who will stand by you through thick and thin, who is enduring and will not be swayed from convictions or promises – and I will show you a person who is stubborn, unreasonable, bull-headed, and infuriating. Now, this person may evolve, of course, and learn to turn these character traits over to the service of Christ. Nevertheless, this gift – this type of personality – comes on a spectrum that runs from great asset to serious detriment. They all do!

Show me a person with enormous empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and awareness of the feelings and inner struggles of others. I will show you a person who can enable others to their destruction; who can weep until they are totally ineffective; who can sympathize their way into people-pleasing that no longer even remembers that we are supposed to be pleasing God. An enormously beautiful gift, but it comes on a spectrum that runs from great asset to serious detriment. They all do!

None of our gifts, strengths, or abilities work correctly if we use them for our own purposes. They came from God, and they do not function very well until we dedicate them back to God, and to God's purposes. What in the world could ever persuade us or induce us to turn our very best abilities over to God? Everything in our culture tries to persuade us to use our abilities to succeed *here*, to make a place for ourselves *here*, to get recognition and appreciation for ourselves *here*.

For most of us, there is only one thing that can interrupt us in our progress toward earthly fame and success, however we define that. Along the way, we hit a snag – a major setback, a failure, a surprise or result we were not expecting – a defeat. In short, we get wounded.

We could stop and benefit from talking about wounds, but there is no time today. Suffice it to say that some wounds are self-inflicted, some wounds come from relatives or friends, and some wounds come from the world around us. Many of us think that we are more wounded than most of the others of our kind, but usually that's because we do not know them very well. Some of us hide our wounds if we can, while others exaggerate them and tell everybody who will listen all about them, in great detail. Nevertheless, everybody who comes to this planet gets wounded. So being wounded, in and of itself, does not qualify us for Christ's army. Wounds sometimes just fill us with self-pity, or make us want to quit on life, or turn us into cynical, resentful agnostics.

But sometimes ... sometimes ... wounds turn us back to our Creator. We wonder what happened and why. Sometimes wounds break our pride – our self-sufficiency. We stumble into humility, ask for help, open ourselves to a power not our own. That kind of wound qualifies us for a very different life, in a very different kind of warfare. And we find ourselves invited into a very different kind of army.

As an aside, and you can go looking for exceptions if you wish, but most often our worst wounds are wounds to our best gifts and strengths. Of course! Those are what we lead with. Those are what we trust. Those are out in front, so to speak. So they are the most likely to get hurt. Why did Edison invent a lightbulb? Why is a person driven to study psychology? Why does a person study theology or go into the ministry? Why does a person who has made a huge fortune establish a foundation to benefit others? Most of the great contributions of humankind are driven by wounds. The gifts are there, but the wounds activate them in a new and different way.

And in Christendom, that cannot be left semiconscious. To be as clear as possible: Where we are wounded, the pride often goes away. Some of you are still confused about pride, humility, and confidence. The loss of pride does not mean you lose confidence; it means you shift from self-confidence to God-confidence – that is, to confidence in God instead of in yourself. Humility does not mean that you have no confidence; it means that your confidence is in God, not in yourself. Pride (*hubris*) means we are self-sufficient: we think we do not need God; we are not thankful, or appreciative; we do not worship. In humility, we know that all things come from God. We owe God our entire allegiance, and all our gifts and abilities come from God and must be devoted to God – turned over to God’s will and guidance and direction.

When we are wounded, sometimes it breaks our pride. If our wounds bring us to true humility, then also it causes us to devote, dedicate, and turn our lives, our gifts, and our abilities over to the purposes of Christ. As long as we live in pride and self-sufficiency – or in the belief that we have a right to live our lives our own way, or for our own purposes – there is no way we can serve Jesus or His Kingdom. Therefore: In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.

But that is not the end of the sermon. It only sets up the possibility of some genuine conversations we might want to have this summer – with ourselves, with each other, and hopefully with our Lord.

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First of all, it reminds us that whenever – and in any way – we come here in pride, it is totally useless to the Kingdom. Jesus cannot use our pride, or any of our strengths or abilities that still run in pride. In fact, they can only do damage and harm to His church, and to His Kingdom.

Far more to the point, and far more fascinating for most of us: We need to think about our wounds. Especially we need to think about the places and ways in which we have been wounded that truly have turned us from pride to humility – that truly have made us dependent on Jesus. And we might go looking to see if those wounds are also now hiding what we used to think of as our best gifts, our best abilities, our best strengths. That is not going to come clear to us in two or three minutes of casual consideration, at least not in most cases. That is going to come clear to us in the process of deep and serious prayer. A spiritual quest, perhaps, to occupy a summer ...

In any case, your wounds are where you can be most useful to Jesus. Your wounds are where you can truly help other people to find their healing, and their way into the love and grace of Jesus. Your wounds are where you are most likely to be able to invite others into the true church – the fellowship and pilgrimage of Christ and His people – without any trace of superiority, self-interest, or coercion. Your wounds – if in them and because of them you have found the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – your wounds are where you are most likely to find that you have healing gifts for others.

In Christ's army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.

TO STAND FIRM

Self-reliance is out of the question. You understand that this passage in Ephesians flies in the face not only of Ralph Waldo Emerson, but of the major mindset of most of America. Not America in its formative days – not America at its foundations – but America in its secular pride and short-sighted prosperity and prowess. The “principalities and powers” of evil overmatch us, and may only be fought with the aid and power of God. That is what this letter to the Ephesians thinks. That is what Christianity believes. Self-reliance is out of the question. We can be more than we ever dreamed – with the presence and help of the Holy Spirit. We are far less than we try to pretend – if we go it alone, or do it our own way, or live for ourselves alone. Self-reliance is out of the question. But God-reliance is still a possibility – if we should care to try it before we die.

Never mind what you think or what I think, for just a moment. This is what the Apostle Paul is trying to tell us, is it not? This is in essential agreement with the major attitude and message of the New Testament, is it not? This is certainly the keynote of the sixth chapter of Ephesians. We can at least be clear that this is the truth, or part of the truth, as held by our tradition. Christianity does claim that there is Satan – that there are satanic powers, messengers, servants, agents. There are spiritual as well as physical realities. The spiritual dimensions contain powers of darkness as well as powers of light. And both have profound effect and impact on the physical realm, and on what is happening inside and all around us. I know some of you do not believe this. But the evidence is everywhere. Some of you are afraid such ideas will be turned into excuses – as if without them the world is free from excuses? You can go on watching *Star Wars* without a “Dark Side” if you want to, but it gets pretty boring. There is no way to learn – and no way to help either. Nothing is wrong; we are all supposed to be the way we already are? No wonder so many people are depressed!

At the very core of the Gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ has overcome the power of Satan. “*Death could not hold Him.*” The confrontation we see in the Crucifixion and Resurrection was not just a matter of Jesus running afoul of the Jewish authorities, or of the way the Roman government executed Him. This was happening on the surface of life, to be sure; it was the way it was working in the outer world. It clarifies some ghastly, but nevertheless familiar, things about how

structure and authority often operate in our world. But this was *merely* the outer surface of what was happening. None of the New Testament writers, teachers, preachers, or believers thought this was the only dimension to the story. It was the physically “seeable” details of an incredible confrontation going on between the powers of darkness and the powers of light. That is the backdrop, the context, the assertion of the New Testament. Jesus, on the Cross and in the Resurrection, was overcoming sin, death, and the Devil. “Conquered” is the best translation of the word they used. For the first time in earth history, it came clear that the powers of light and love were not as hopelessly overmatched as we all tended secretly to believe. For the first time in earth history, a light shined in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it. It even made us realize that some of the light we had seen before had not been as “overcome” as we had supposed. (Jesus also made it very clear that Abraham, Moses, and Elijah were still alive.)

Those who noticed, those who saw, those who believed what happened – were stunned, shocked, and incredulous. They were joyful, but they were also stunned, shocked, and incredulous. It was not just the story they were seeing on the surface, powerful as that was. It was also the implications – like endless peals of thunder after a great lighting bolt, or the aftershocks of a giant earthquake. They kept clearing their ears, blinking and rubbing their eyes, trying to clear their heads and hang on to their pulses and still manage, somehow, to keep breathing. “My God,” they said. “This means the forces of light and truth have more power than we ever dared dream or hope! What else *could* it mean? Did we miss something? Is it just another ruse or trick of the Enemy? But NO! My God, it is true ... we can trust it and go for it.” And with great shouts of joy – and the deep resolve of a wonderful new anguish – they began throwing away all old life-patterns and all the heavy trappings that went with them. And they did whatever they had to do to spend their time and life with Jesus – or, more accurately, with the Holy Spirit. (*“Dwell in me.”*)

However, the ancient enemy is not gone. Satan and all of Satan’s messengers, servants, ruses, and traps are still operable everywhere in the world. Self-reliance is out of the question! No human is a match for such a subtle, powerful, intelligent, well-organized foe. The only difference is that we have an Advocate – a Companion who is able to stand against the foe, and who can and will show up at any time of the day or night to fight with and for us – a Spirit Being greater than Satan who can and will “stoop to our weakness” on a daily basis, at any time

we have sense enough to cry for help ... or gratitude enough to want to serve His Kingdom. And after all, who wants to go on living in darkness or serving the dark powers, as long as Light has any chance at all?

To which a friend of mine says, “You’ve been reading too much science fiction.” And I reply, “Is it science fiction that you are divorced, and lost custody of your kids; that you claim to be worried sick about how they are being raised; that you are more than concerned about the influence of the culture at school and all around them? And what about the stories you just told me about what’s going on at work? Maybe you don’t read *enough* science fiction! For sure you don’t read enough Bible.”

So maybe I don’t put it the way the great philosophers would have put it. But I put it approximately the way the early Christians thought about it and felt about it. It was not the philosophers, it was the everyday, humble Christians – with trust and faith in Jesus – who carried the light, and who shaped the fellowship of believers that has carried the Gospel of love and hope down the centuries to our present day.

Self-reliance is out of the question. Evil – especially true inner evil – can only be fought with the aid and power of Jesus Christ. That is what Paul knows and is trying to describe. And this is not five minutes after his conversion, either. The first blush of naiveté has long since worn off. The zeal and enthusiasm of that first taste of the acceptance and love of God in Christ Jesus have now been through at least twenty years of tempering and testing. Paul has wrestled with the fevers of malaria, and he has been beaten and stoned and shipwrecked and left for dead. He has made friends and lost friends, and he has lived through the pain of church councils at Antioch and Jerusalem that wrenched and divided believers from each other and sidetracked the work of the Gospel itself. I am simply saying there is not a whole lot more that could have happened to Paul to weaken his faith – to make him discouraged, downhearted, and cynical. If we are looking for reasons or excuses to defect, it does not help to match hard knocks, failures, or bitter experiences with the apostles.

Satan misses no tricks, leaves no love-bonds untested, allows neither single child nor full army of light to pass by or accomplish anything constructive if he can help it. Paul is no neophyte. His hope of Heaven is undiminished, and his joy in the companionship of Christ is obviously greater than ever. But he also knows he is in a fight. He has been for years. Do you know you are in a fight? People sometimes say to me, as if somehow surprised: “This isn’t easy. I thought I’d be much

closer to perfect by now. If I'm following Jesus, aren't most of my serious problems supposed to be over by now?" Do you know you are in a fight? You think Satan is an easy opponent?

Self-reliance is out of the question! Without Jesus by his side, Paul knows he wouldn't last very long. Without the full armor of God, he has no chance. Of course, for Paul it may have been far worse than for us. Satan has had a seven-level alarm out on Paul for years. Paul cannot make a move without every ranking demon in the territory looking for some way to stop or undo him. The opposition keeps mounting all through his life. Do we not know the patterns with those who serve too well? Luther, Cotton, Washington, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Tyndale, Chrysostom, John Husse, Thomas Cranmer, Ignatius, Hugh Latimer, Girolamo Savonarola, Thomas More, Augustine, Thomas à Becket, Origen, Polycarp, Raymond Lull, and on and on. But, of course, there is no Satan; it's just an accident that it happens every time. Pattern does not imply meaning, or intelligence – as all the “intelligent” people of our day keep trying to tell us ...

So here is Paul, chained to a Roman soldier (or at least with a constant guard), awaiting trial for the grave crime of allegiance to Jesus Christ. He is not upset, except that he hopes to speak boldly and fearlessly and tellingly for the cause of Christ. But he also knows and feels the drama that is going on around him and within him – the one that is deeper than the overt details make clear. And he knows that all his fellow Christians are also engaged in this greater, unseen warfare in some way. Wanting to make that clear in a helpful way, and hoping to encourage his friends, Paul searches for an analogy. There beside him is a Roman soldier, and the images of warfare come to mind. Some of us might wish Paul had been in a more poetic mood. We suspect that the imagery of warfare is unfortunate because it's so easy for us to get hooked back into the feelings of anger and harm that undo the very points he is trying to make.

Nevertheless, Paul muses. I would not be a bit surprised to learn that Paul was engaging in conversation the soldiers who guarded him (he always did, and more than a few times converted them). And this letter about a different kind of warfare may have been one way he tried to reach them, before sending it with Tychicus to Ephesus. But these are only my own musings.

TO STAND FIRM

And please, the scenario of this analogy is not that of a lone, valiant hero type. This passage is about a “soldier of the line” whose task – along with that of all the soldiers around him – is to hold the line. Paul’s imagery is of a common soldier doing his part in the midst of an army, where if every individual does his part, the battle will be won. It was the genius of the Roman legions. It was what made them the most effective battle machine the world had ever seen. Every individual soldier knew his task, his position. And his job was never to break rank, never to run – not in fear, and not to take advantage either. No matter what happened: stand firm; hold your position; keep your place in line; move together on command, but always in your place. They trained and trained to obey this principle. There was no glory, no grandstanding, no bid for fame or acclaim as was standard in all other armies. Stand firm, hold your position, and we will win in the end.

When you fight evil according to the Spirit’s orders, few are likely to notice in this realm. (Maybe afterward, looking back, a few will. But not at the time.) And the issue is to stand firm! Hold your place! Keep your position! God – the Holy Spirit – knows what he is doing and will take care of the strategy. Our part is to obey orders and stand firm. Christ is the head of the church – the brains of the outfit. Who still remembers that in our time?

So hear the passage in this light. *“Put on the full armor which God provides, so that you may be able to stand firm against the devices of the devil (verse 11) ... then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst (verse 13) ... to complete every task and still to stand” (verse 13b).* (“We will fight in the streets; we will fight on the beaches ...” oops, wrong guy. Well, Churchill got it from Paul, not the other way around.) *“Stand firm, I say” (verse 14).*

And why wear the shoes of the gospel of peace? *“To give you firm footing” (verse 15).* *“Keep watch and persevere” (verse 18).* So the mood and tone are clear. This is not a special or heroic moment. This is the soldier’s basic function – the thing for which he is trained, his reason for existing. Be ready, be watchful, be steady and consistent ... and when each onslaught comes, stand your ground. Withstand the attack no matter how fierce. Patient endurance is always the second highest-ranking virtue of the Christian Life. Stand firm.

So how do we respond? Run off and do this; run off and do that. If this doesn’t please me, try that; if this doesn’t work right away,

change tactics: change wives or jobs or houses or goals or gods. There is mayhem out there – have you noticed? And whether he exists or not, Satan loves it!

Self-reliance is out of the question. It will absolutely require the armor that God provides. Nevertheless, once properly armed – stand firm!

Paul now lists the necessary items in the order a soldier would normally put them on. FASTEN ON THE BELT OF TRUTH. The first reaction, since this is such a powerful passage, is to make this the biggest definition of truth we can find. So we think things like: Encircle yourself with all the philosophical knowledge of the ages; or with all the scientific comprehension of the universe; or with all the theological awareness of God’s nature and plan and purpose. That is a bit grand, don’t you think? Grandiose is Satan’s armor, not Christ’s. Seeking knowledge is a high endeavor, but that is not the kind of truth that helps us to stand firm.

The girdle or belt keeps us strong and quick. Pants had not yet been invented. A man did not want a lot of loose-flowing cloth flapping around and getting in the way when he needed to go into action. To run, to work – especially to fight – you “girded up your loins,” as the old language said. Pull all the loose stuff together, tuck it in, and pull the belt tight. A few still know. You can lift twice the weight without injury, or work for hours with far less fatigue, if you have a nice wide belt cinched tight around your middle. If you mean business, you need the belt.

Only, the belt of truth is not high knowledge of the eternal verities, but the down-to-earth choice of honesty. In a fight with the powers of evil, we need to have few illusions, few exaggerations, few excuses, few fantasies about our prowess or our weakness. Put on the belt of honesty (close relative of humility) so you do not become entangled with false postures, pride, or unnecessary guilt or fear. Know yourself. Get the belt cinched up and be who you are, no more and no less. Hard for Satan to play games with you if you have an inner honesty. No need to color things up; no secrets to hide; no need to pretend. With God present, who you really are will do just fine, thank you very much. Keep it clear and do not try to change it. The belt of truth: “Yes, I really did make that mistake. I am sorry.” “No, I did not intend to hurt you, but if you wish to stay hurt, that’s your decision.” “Yes, I would love to.” “No, I have no interest in that.”

“Rarely have we seen a person fail who had the capacity to be honest.” Fasten on the belt of truth.

PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. Again it is easy to get the meaning too high. We will hit all the high meanings we need when we get to the shield and the helmet. The breastplate, or coat of mail, covers the upper torso, and especially protects the heart. I suspect that Paul is not thinking so much about the final righteousness of God as about our own desires for goodness. Remember that Paul is talking about our war with satanic powers. If they can make us cynical about goodness, or persuade us that we don't really care about doing good, then such wounds will indeed cripple us for any meaningful struggle against evil. I know it's embarrassing, especially in public – but you *do* love the right! You love to see justice done. You love to do deeds that genuinely help others. However tarnished it seems to get at times, you carry a great nobility within your breast. And one of Satan's first tricks is to make you think that is not true, or to convince you that you have lost it beyond repair.

We are vulnerable in the heart region. Put on the breastplate of righteousness so Satan cannot convince you that you have no nobility of soul – that you do not really love the good, or care about what happens to others. Goodness is God's armor against evil. This is not self-reliance; it is armor that God provides, and God is the source of all genuine goodness. So take a guess: Who would rather have you cynical – God, or Satan? We need to claim and protect our personal awareness of our own love of the good, our own personal hunger for righteousness. The breastplate protects the heart – protects what you really value and care about.

LET THE SHOES ON YOUR FEET BE THE GOSPEL OF PEACE, TO GIVE YOU FIRM FOOTING. In the fight against the forces of darkness, if you remember your Message and if you are ever-ready to speak of Christ's deliverance to any person you find still in bondage, then your feet are on firm ground. Satan will not be able to unbalance you – to knock you off your feet. If we take our stand on any other message or see our purpose in any other light, then Paul believes that Satan or his servants will be able to throw us fast and hard. What are we going to save people with? Money, food, yoga, land, diplomas, our friendship, Bible knowledge? Lots of things are wonderful in their own place and way, but do not forget the real Message. Do not forget what we are really about.

The gospel of peace (need I remind you?) is *not* peace in this world, or peace *with* this world. It does not mean we are going to be super-nice to everybody, or really polite and ingratiating to Satan or his servants. The gospel of peace is about *peace between us and God* – and the peace other people can have with God if they want it. It is about the reconciliation between us and God that Jesus has made possible. Because of the death and resurrection – and because of the love of God for us that Jesus has revealed – we are no longer in a fight against God, God’s wrath, or God’s judgment against us. Be done with all of that – and all the fear that goes with it. We have changed sides, and the fight is now against Satan and his minions. That is what the gospel of peace is about: peace between us and God. No other peace is guaranteed, and peace with Satan (which some of us know about) is definitely repealed!

That’s the shoes. The feet symbolize the foundation, the understanding. Keep a firm footing. Stand on the gospel of your peace with God. And if you are not afraid to mention the same good news to others, it may happen that some of Satan’s warriors may switch sides and end up fighting along with you. In any case, that is what the fight is about: peace with God ... reconciliation with God ... friendship with God ... loving God. That is what the fight is about and what Satan is always trying to break up or undo in any way he can. Peace with God is the issue. Depend on it. Stand on it. Bet your life on it.

We did not get to the whole armor yet. That leaves us in a precarious position, theoretically. Except you can finish up the passage on your own, and I will no doubt want to talk more about it next Sunday. But maybe at least we know we are in a fight, and maybe we even know which side we are on. And are you remembering? This armor is not about our struggles with other humans. It is not a fight against human foes. That is why self-reliance is out of the question. The fight is too big, too important, and too deadly for that. But what is truly wonderful is that we do not have to make this armor. It is God’s armor. It is there waiting for us. All we have to do is put it on.

Of course, nobody is going to put on armor if they do not think they are in a fight ...

THE SEVENTH PROTECTION

As I hope you noticed last Sunday: With this passage in the sixth chapter of Ephesians, it is easy to get focused on the belt and the breastplate and the shoes, and forget what Paul is actually talking about. That is, the imagery is so much fun to play with – and so applicable to so many things – that we can get off on any tangent we like and forget that Paul is talking about spiritual warfare. Today we will want to add the shield, the helmet, and the sword. Only, we do not want to become terrorists – or even soldiers in the usual physical sense. But we *are* physical creatures, so the imagery of warfare and armor, if we are not careful, can easily sidetrack us. At least it often has in the past. It is easy for us to get our aggressiveness triggered, and consciously or unconsciously start thinking about causes or crusades or problems we may be having with various individuals, institutions, or organizations. Some of us would love to have God “armor us” so we could march into some fray of our own choosing and be invincible, victorious, and heroic – and perhaps become famous, and hopefully rich, in the process. Such thoughts, of course, have never crossed *my* mind. But you should be warned and wary: that has nothing to do with what Paul is talking about.

Paul has specifically stated that our fight is not against human foes. It is against “***principalities and powers.***” Are any of you remembering (from the class on the Book of Revelation, perhaps) that these are technical terms for two of the nine choirs of angels? The facts are not available to us (as facts), but we are into the mythology, and maybe the truth, of first-century Judaism and Christianity. Some of the angels from each layer or category of angels have fallen, and they are following Lucifer (of the Seraphim, the highest layer of angels) into pride and rebellion. There is no time for the details here, but that makes the passage doubly fascinating. Specifically, it makes it clear that this armor imagery is not intended for our pet peeves or causes, or for our battles with one another. In fact, the passage reminds us that our human foes are *also* caught in Satan’s bondage, even as we ourselves often are, and that *all of us* need to be freed, not pitted against each other. Indeed, it is the work and purpose of Jesus Christ to free us from this very bondage.

Then let us be clear and keep clear: It is classic Christian wisdom that we live in a fallen, imperfect, rebellious dimension. This world is not Heaven! Things are not running here the way God designed and

created them to run. All of us participate in this mayhem at all times, at least to some degree. We do not fully understand who we are or what we are here for. We do not comprehend the true worth or value of each other. This is basic Christian theology, 1-A. In this realm, we are separated – alienated from our Creator – to some degree, at all times. We “*see through a glass darkly.*” (I Corinthians 13:12) “*We have done those things which we ought not to have done – and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done.*” (Prayer of Confession) Not completely – not totally – but always to some degree. There is mist and confusion in our prayers, and therefore in our primary relationships. We do not know God fully. We do not trust God freely and completely. We do not submit to or obey God with willing, childlike trust in all things and in all our affairs. Yet life will not, and cannot, run right unless or until the creatures know, trust, love, and obey their Creator. Abou Ben Adhem (James Henry Leigh Hunt) thinks we can learn to love our neighbors and skip learning to love God. But that has not been working out very well on our planet so far.

We keep forgetting this primary condition (known formally in some circles as “The Fall”). So sometimes we get shocked when we encounter trouble or evil. Sometimes we are amazed when we make mistakes. Sometimes we experience injustice, sorrow, failure, or defeat – and we act surprised, as if we thought this wouldn’t or couldn’t or shouldn’t happen ... at least not to us. Where do we think we are? In Heaven?! And *who* do we think we are? The saved and fully developed who have no need of a Savior?

Strangely enough, we do keep forgetting. Is it the mark of our origins? The soul – the spirit within – is created by God, and it does not ever quite get used to this realm. Some spirit-origin seems to linger. The evidence of our true design is quite strong within us, and it creates many problems for us here. We *do* innately think things “should” be perfect. Where does that come from? We do instinctively think *we* should be perfect. What incredible audacity! Yet we cannot shake it. We are ever discontent, and we long for a “home” we have never seen ... for love we have never known ... to be what we have never been.

Mariana, in former years, had a tendency to be late – I mean always, and to everything. It used to annoy me, especially when I was so self-centered that I thought she did it to annoy me. It took me years to learn never to go with her if I wanted to be on time. Then finally it dawned on me what the missing link was: Her soul could not fathom the idea of

needing time to travel. She was ready to go when it was time to be there. Some residue of the spirit realm in her expected to transport from place to place instantaneously. Her mind did not want to remember or face the grim fact that ... the wings were gone. They were not supposed to be gone! How enormously painful to have to realize that they were. All of us have some places in our lives where we simply cannot or will not admit that we are where we are ... with the wings gone. "I don't like these problems, therefore I shouldn't have to have them."

Is that why so many of us fill our schedules too full? We keep forgetting; we keep expecting to accomplish a week's work in a single day. And sometimes we try to love too many people too well, or we go through times when we try to run away from all of it because it's so frustrating and painful, so hard to manage ... with the wings gone.

In the same manner, it is hard to remember that all our loved ones will die here, and that we ourselves will not be here for very long. We hear it and watch it going on all around us all our lives. We know it's true. But our minds simply do not want to remember it in a calm, rational manner. So we forget ... and then we get devastated by the most obvious and certain fact in all the world. God has never ever hinted or promised that we could escape death in its many forms over and over and over in this world. If we had time, we could go around the room and every single person here could tell stories of near misses and close calls. Yet we keep acting shocked, angry, and surprised by death – as if we were already in the eternal realms. We still think and act as if there were some way to find security and safety here. How strange! And yet, is it not one of the clearest hints of our true origin and destiny ... that we are surprised by death?

Well, we could and maybe we should go on about this trouble we have remembering where we are. My point, however, is that whether *we* remember it or not, it is Paul's perspective. It is classic Christian wisdom that we live in a realm that has trouble remembering – trouble knowing and obeying its Creator. It is also certain, in Christian teachings, that this alienation is a reflection of warfare and conflict between the forces of destruction and the powers of life; between the powers of darkness and the powers of light; between the satanic legions and God's faithful people. Only, we keep trying to make it all seem so big and wicked and ridiculous ... so we won't have to understand it. Every single time I want to do things my own way for my own reasons, I am satanic – I am

following Satan's lead. It is as simple as that. Satan is just a cosmic prodigal son – a higher-dimensional spoiled brat.

Every time any of us want to do things our own way instead of God's way, we serve Satan and strengthen his kingdom. It is as simple as that. I do not have to kill a thousand people in cold blood to be satanic. At any moment in any day, I can say yes when I should have said no, or no when I should have said yes, or either one without even asking what the Spirit wants – and I am off track, out of the Light, no longer obedient. No evil is intended – at least not consciously or on purpose. Probably no evil is intended from Satan's perspective either. We just want our own way. "What's wrong with that?" we say "innocently." Well, for one thing, it is destroying us – destroying all life on this planet. "But we're going to die anyway." True, so now we want to deserve it? Live as if that were our aim?

It is not only Christian wisdom that Satan is largely in control in our realm (or world), but that most human beings are only dimly or partially aware of it. That is, we know the ways in which we are unhappy, lonely, angry, afraid, etc. But in spite of all that, we seem to be only dimly conscious of our bondage. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that we become aware of our distance and alienation from God. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that we become aware of our slavery to satanic principles, individual power, control, autonomy, privilege. We even think that our real problem is that we have not learned to be better and more effective at getting our own way. So we actually spend a lot of time and energy trying to get better at that. And as the old saying put it: "Practice makes perfect."

The whole human race tends to be in denial of its real disease and danger. At least that is the Christian perspective and belief. And Christianity goes on to talk about a Savior – a deliverer from this sin, this bondage. The normal and expected reaction to the Christian Message is: "You're crazy! I don't need a Savior. All I need, if indeed I will admit that I need anything, is a little more money, a little more power, a little more authority. Then I'd be just fine. Then I'd be happy. Then I wouldn't have any of these fears or this anger or the imperfections or problems any more. So if you want to do something for me, if you really care, if you really love me – like you Christians are always talking about – why don't you give me some food, money, power, or something

useful? But keep your Jesus. I don't need a Savior! I'm not under any bondage!"

Christians have been hearing that refrain, from those clearly caught in this world's bondage, for as far back as we can remember. Strangely enough, today you can hear it from inside the church almost as much as you can outside the church.

And no, that is not terribly surprising either. Satan is a great strategist. First, a campaign to get people to disbelieve in his existence. The best technique for doing that is to get us to think we are too intelligent and too in control of our own lives to believe in him. Second, get us to believe that our real problems are because of other people, not because of our own bondage to Satan. Thirdly, confuse, divide and, if possible, silence or ridicule any voices that know what's going on. That will just about do it, don't you think? Then the whole world can go to Hell, with everybody working harder and harder to do more and more good against all the bad guys. And that way, nobody will ever figure out what really went wrong. So we will keep revising the bylaws, electing new leaders, starting new groups and movements, and trying to punish those who do not help or cooperate. But no matter how well we do it or how hard we try, it will not have any impact on our real problem: being out of touch with our Creator – being disobedient and rebellious toward God. It used to be called "dying in your sin." But that was when people knew that "sin" meant alienation or separation from God.

The loss of the awareness of the presence of God is the root of all evil. No good can grow or last in Godless soil. All problems and all evil trace to the Source. All true healing and hope trace to the Source also. There is animosity and alienation between us and God, and it needs healing – reconciling. Everything else will straighten if that straightens. That is why the Reconciler came. It is also why His impact has been so huge. It is also why the world has hated Him so much, and felt so threatened by His coming. Is it not amazing that a Man with no weapon in His hand – no coercion except persuasion and invitation – could create such fear and opposition and anger and hatred? We could all be happy atheists, perhaps – if we had not seen the response to His coming.

Paul sees it, and tries to help us see it. He wants us to wear the full armor of God so that Satan cannot take away our freedom and get us back under his bondage. That is the purpose of the armor Paul is talking about: to keep us protected against Satan's efforts to get us back under

his control. Satan will try to do that by making us feel guilty and worthless – or by making us feel important and self-sufficient. Either way will work just fine. Satan will do that by making us feel discouraged, depressed, and useless – or by making us feel strong, invulnerable, and proud. Either way will work just fine. Satan will do that by making us feel terribly afraid – or by convincing us that there is nothing to fear. Either way will work just fine.

So Paul says we should put on the armor. And now the function of the armor comes pretty clear. TAKE UP THE SHIELD OF FAITH against the flaming darts of the evil one – the accusations, the guilt, the fear, the discouragement. The shield of faith means, “God loves me because of the way God is, not because of my merit.” That is made absolutely clear on the Cross. And indeed, no dart can stick or burn against that conviction. Jesus revealed what God is really like. It does not depend upon us. Satan has no weapon against justification by faith. “*Above all,*” says Paul, “*take up the shield of faith*” – faith in Jesus Christ that allows you to know for sure that the distance between you and God is not God’s idea, desire, judgment, or punishment. God wants you – loves you. The words are old, but the heart that finally believes them is released from Satan’s grip, and protected from every dart Satan can hurl. *Above all, take up the shield of faith:* Justification by faith, not by works – not by merit, success, bank account, good deeds, heredity, nationality, or correct political views, but by faith in God’s undeserved, unearned love. You are God’s child. Awaken. Believe it. Trust it.

And TAKE THE HELMET OF SALVATION. Nobody likes to wear a helmet. They are hot and heavy. They limit the feeling of freedom and of being part of the vast scenery all around you. Whether you ride a motorcycle or a bike, or climb, or play soccer, nobody likes to wear a helmet. But the sane, the alert, the aware end up doing so. Why? Because it is better than getting your head beat in.

The helmet of salvation: The sure and certain awareness that you are going to be okay. I am obviously not talking about this world, or normal human ways of evaluating who has “made it” or with what kinds of toys. God is not only love but POWER. And if God loves you, God will save you – meaning, your place in the eternal family is assured and guaranteed. If we do not know that, Satan will beat our heads in. That is exactly what Paul means! Where do we wear a helmet? Satan will beat our heads in with fear, anxiety, endless doubts, and images

of horrid things happening. It is when we are frightened that we do our worst deeds, trying vainly to protect ourselves from things real or imagined – and if we are frightened enough, we do not care how. *Take up the helmet of salvation.* To get it simple: You are never supposed to be saying or thinking, “IF I get to Heaven.” You are supposed to *know* it – not because you do so well, but because *Jesus* does so well. Why has it taken two thousand years to get this clear? Taking up the helmet of *maybe* or *I might* is no helmet! Not even a good beanie. And certainly it cannot protect you from Satan’s blows.

And TAKE UP THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD. Here is the famous imagery so used and misused in the Book of Revelation. Our weapon is the WORD. You can think Paul means the Bible if you want to, but that is not correct. You know how much I keep after you to read and study the Bible, so it is tempting to use this passage for a little backup and extra incentive. But that is not what Paul means. He is talking about the living MESSAGE of God’s love and power – his purpose and plans – and their application to anyone who will receive it. The WORD converts. The WORD brings light and hope. The WORD turns us from Satan, or Self, toward God.

Well, a number of people who have been given this “sword” of the WORD – like Paul and Luke and Mark and John – *did* write things that got into the Bible. And those of us who study it are endlessly grateful for their efforts. Only, this passage is about YOU taking the sword. Is there any way around that? This passage is about YOU speaking the MESSAGE of Light and Hope – to somebody, somewhere. Is there any way around that? Is Paul saying: Hey, I carry the sword of the Word as well as I know how, so you don’t have to? Hey, let your minister do it – he gets paid to? Hey, go to Barnes & Noble – there’s a whole section on religion there? Read the article in *Newsweek* that I just read? Watch the television special I just heard about? NONE OF IT WILL DO. None of it even comes close. Accept, take up, and put on the helmet and the sword. It is *your* armor – *your* sword! God provides, but it is given to YOU.

The Bible can help, but it cannot do it for you. Some of you have been spectators long enough. Time to stick your own neck out. Time to trust that God will give you the words you need to speak when it is your turn to bear witness. Time to know that the Spirit wants to speak through you when you are called before courts, councils, Satan’s servants, your mate, your children, your boss, your friends, whomever.

You do not have to blather all the time – or to everyone – like the neophytes sometimes do. But be alert to the Spirit’s touch, and be willing to speak when you are asked to. And get alert enough so that it only takes a touch, not a two-by-four between the eyes. By the way, Paul writes this when he himself is about to face the Roman Emperor (Nero, it will turn out) in the scariest and most important trial of his life. That is clearly on his mind, and he is counting on this sword, not on his own eloquence. He is counting on the Spirit’s inspiration.

Paul apparently lost this court battle, and his life. Which does not mean that the Spirit failed to speak eloquently through him. The Spirit persuades but does not coerce. How I wish we had an account of this scene and speech. Apparently no one “on our side” survived to tell of it. But we can be pretty sure that Paul was not surprised by whatever happened. He knew he lived in a broken world. He knew how much the world needed to know Christ. They go together. And Paul would have died by now, in this world, no matter what the Roman Emperor had decided back then. So the only thing that really mattered was his staying faithful. And he knew that too. Do we?

I must draw your attention to one more thing. There are six items which Paul calls “the whole armor of God”: the belt, the breastplate, the shoes ... the shield, the helmet, the sword. Six is a good number for protection with physical affairs, but seven is the holy number. Seven is the number of spiritual power. There are seven archangels; seven rays of light; seven days in the week, and the Sabbath, or seventh, is the holy day. There are seven moving lights, and seven candles represent them in all biblical history. Seven is the number of spiritual power. Do you really think Paul is going to leave you with six protections? Paul is Pharisee through and through, by his own word, and he is rabbinically trained and spiritually very aware, experienced, and faithful. Do you really think Paul is going to leave you with six protections?

Paul designed his list with seven protections from the beginning, though many have missed it. In such a list, the seventh is always the last, the most important, and the most powerful item of all. All the other armor will be dependent upon it – will be *activated* by it. In fact, without the seventh protection, the rest of the armor – instead of making you essentially invulnerable – will only weigh you down and discourage you. I have told you a little bit about the six protections. But you really should pay the most attention of all to the seventh protection.