

Strong in the Lord

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In today's Epistle lesson the Apostle Paul calls us to prepare for war – for battle against the satanic foe. He and his demons are very real enemy, they have great power and resources; and they've been waging war on the human race since the dawn of Creation. Like in the Cold War, there's no actual shooting going on. There are no battlefields that can be seen. No, this war is waged inside of us: in our hearts, our minds, and our souls. But unlike the Cold War which came to an end, this enemy isn't going to go away one day soon. He's persistent. And like a terrorist, he's content to lie hidden or disguised, waiting patiently for an opportune moment, any show of weakness, or any timely target that may present itself. That's when he strikes. And that's why Paul warns us to get ready and remain so at all times. It is said that war is hell. That's an overstatement. Sure, war is bad; maybe it's as bad as this life can possibly get – but it's not hell. No, hell is where you end up if you lose this war, and it's worse than anything you can imagine. Your enemy wants to see you there. And I should add that there are no civilians in this conflict. If you are not a combatant, if you are not actively engaged in the fight, then you are either a prisoner or a casualty, and probably both.

Which is all the more reason for us to heed Paul's call to arms and to prepare ourselves for the fight. The key to victory is preparedness. Paul calls us to keep in mind the vast forces that are arrayed against us and the terrible consequences of losing precisely so that we will be on guard and doing the ongoing training, drilling, and checking of equipment necessary to ensure that we remain strong in the Lord. And the emphasis in that statement is on "in the Lord". It's not about what *you* do to strengthen yourself in terms of faith and obedience ; it's on what the Lord does to equip and empower you for the fight. The idea is not that you are to be strong; but rather that you are to let go of any trust you have in yourself so that the Lord will be strong in you. It's only in his strength that you will be able to stand your ground against the foe.

And to help us understand how we do this, Paul breaks it out in terms of the armor that Christ our Lord gives us to wear in combat by which he communicates his strength to us and gives us the ability to stand, to fight, and to win. Of course, it's spiritual armor. You can't see it. It's something received by faith; but it's pretty tough stuff. You may remember that when young David faced the mighty giant Goliath, a skilled and heavily armed warrior, it looked like all he was wearing was a linen tunic. But I ask you, who was the best equipped to fight that day? David said, "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel." There was really no contest, was there? The strength of God versus the strength of man? Equipped as he was with the unseen Armor of God, David could have toppled a hundred Goliaths before lunch that day. Likely would have too, if the enemy had not fled the field in panic. With this Armor of God we too can face and defeat the gigantic forces arrayed against us.

So, what does it consist of? First Paul says, "Gird your loins with truth". I suppose it sounds a bit better to say "fasten on the belt of truth"; but that loses something of the idea Paul wants to convey. He's not talking about a belt worn around the waist, but rather the long strip of linen that men in his day used to wrap around their lower torsos and private parts. It's what we would call underwear; but "underwear of truth" doesn't have the same ring to it, does it? But the fact is that it's supposed to be offensive. The *truth* that Paul is talking about is the truth that we so much hate to face: that underneath it all we are sinners – weak, naked, and ashamed

sinner. We are in our own right unable to stand. We haven't even got the right to be on the Lord's side. We are by nature his enemies. It's by his grace alone that he lets us stand under his banner. That's the truth we are to own first and wear closest to our skin because it's the foundation of everything that follows.

Next Paul says strap on the Breastplate of Righteousness. The breastplate, as you know, was the piece of armour that covered the chest and belly – all the vital organs. It was far and away the most important thing for keeping a warrior alive on the battlefield. And so it is with us: having acknowledged our own sinfulness and shame, what keeps us alive is the righteousness with which God covers us. It's the righteousness of Jesus that's imputed to us by faith. We trust that the Lord Jesus died for sinners, that his death on the cross atoned for our sins, and that by his resurrection he proclaimed victory over sin and death. That's what it means to wear the breastplate of righteousness: to cover our hearts by Christ and his atoning work for us. Then when Satan attacks with accusations of sin we can say, "Yes, underneath I'm a sinner, weak and helpless; but I'm covered by what Christ my Lord did for me when he shed his blood." Coming up against that impenetrably hard surface, the accusations of Satan just bounce off. He cannot strike the heart and take our lives.

On your feet, Paul says, wear the readiness of the Gospel of Peace. New recruits in the Army learn very fast how important it is to take care of their feet. If you can't march, you can't get to the battle. This was especially true in the ancient world because there was no other way to get around. So to be ready, you need to protect your feet and wear good, sturdy, comfortable boots. And your feet are, of course, your point of contact with the earth. So what Paul is talking about here is living the Christian life in this world. He's talking about the thick soles that keep your feet from damage as you stroll through the jagged rocks and sharp thorns of temptation that lie along your route. He's talking about being prepared at all times to give the reason for the hope that lies within you – that is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. He's talking about being ready to forgive others as you yourself have been forgiven. And he's talking about leaning forward to lend a hand to those in need and to show forth the love of Christ in this dark world. In these ways we bring to the world the peace that we know in Christ our Lord.

Next Paul says take up the Shield of Faith. In Paul's day shields were made of thick animal hides stretched over wooden frames. They were used primarily to defend soldiers from longer range weapons like arrows and stones hurled by slingers. When the enemy loosed a volley, all the soldiers would turn at once and raise their shields to form a wall and roof of protection. Sure, they still had to deal with the impact of the missiles, but the shields absorbed the shock and dissipated it. And they kept anything sharp from getting through and wounding anyone on their otherwise unprotected arms and legs. That's how faith protects the soldier of God. Satan has all kinds of arrows and darts to launch at us. You think of Job in the Old Testament, and how he came under the heavy bombardment of everything Satan could throw at him. In one day he lost all the wealth the Lord had blessed him with. Then, far worse, his ten children were killed when a sudden windstorm caused the collapse of the house they were in. Defended by the shield of faith Job was able to absorb these terrible blows. He said, "I've always trusted in the Lord in the past. He's been good to me. I'm not going to give up on him now." Then Satan attacked Job's health, striking him down with a painful and ugly skin disease. You may remember that in grief Job sat down in the ashes; but still, he stood strong in faith. That's how faith protects us: it doesn't stop the blows from coming; rather it enables us to withstand them. And faith can be strengthened and improved. One way the enemy would try to defeat an army protected by shields was to launch arrows tipped with burning pitch or tar. The goal was to set the shields afire and get the soldiers to drop them so that they'd be exposed. To prevent that from happening, before battle the soldiers would soak their shields in water. Then

burning arrows would hit the shields and fizzle out. In the same way we can strengthen our faith. We can soak our shields in the water of God's Word and Spirit. We can remember our Baptisms and the promises God our Father made to us then. And we can confess our sins and weaknesses and receive again his absolution and the assurance of his forgiveness and love. These are the things that continue to reinforce and strengthen faith so that our shields are not burned by the enemy's fiery attacks.

And then completing the armor we wear, Paul tells us to place upon our heads the Helmet of Salvation. The idea here is that we keep our focus on the goal. We are to keep the final victory in view and surround our minds with thoughts of the heavenly rewards already laid up for us by the Lord Jesus. We know where we are heading. We know the victory has already been won. And this is what keeps us from discouragement when the going gets tough. No matter how bad it gets, we are certain that there's a bright and glorious future for us that will last forever. We know that today we wear the helmet; but one day soon will wear the crown.

Finally, Paul enjoins us to take up the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. And there's no question about it: a sword is for hand to hand combat. It takes training to know how to handle one, and with it a soldier does two things. First, he can use it to block the attacks of the enemy. You think about Jesus when he was tempted by Satan. Each time the devil made a lunge, Jesus easily parried his attack with a quotation from Scripture. The devil would say, "Hey Jesus, how about this?" And Jesus would reply, "It is written." For point of contrast, you think about how Eve handled her temptation. Satan said, "Did God really say?" And she kind of waffled. What was it God said? She allowed herself to be led astray. In the same way, we can use the Word of God to overcome the lies and tricks of Satan – but only if we train to use it. The Sword of the Spirit only works for you if you've become accustomed to its grip and have practiced swinging it. You have to learn how to block those blows. The second thing a soldier does with a sword is to strike at the enemy. And what I want you to see here is that God's Word is the only offensive weapon we've been given. But then, it's the only one we need. "Not by power, not by might; but by my Word", says the Lord." That's how the Lord accomplishes everything he does: simply by the power of his Word. With his spoken Word he called the Creation into being, and with his Word made flesh he saved us from sin and death. Can we have any doubt that in the pages of Holy Scripture the Lord has provided us with the most powerful weapon he could possibly have placed into our hands?

And *all* this spiritual combat equipment the Lord gives to us so that his power and strength may be at work in us and through us. Wearing God's Armor *you* will be able to stand through all trials and temptations, against all the fury and raging of the forces of evil, and with your Lord carry the cross he's assigned and push through to the glory that awaits you. But that necessarily means that you wear it, that every day you put it on again, and that you stand in inspection making sure that you're wearing it right. It's not enough just to have equipment. You have to maintain it, drill and train with it, and practice using it. That's what preparedness is all about. And preparedness is the key to our victory.

Which is why Paul closes this passage with a request for prayer also for himself. He asks the soldiers of the Lord's Army whom he is strengthening and equipping by his teaching to pray for him, their drill sergeant. Pray that the Lord give me the words to proclaim the mystery of the full Gospel. Pray that I may do so boldly – for it is in precisely this that *you* will be made strong in the Lord.

May our Gracious Lord who has redeemed us from sin and placed at our disposal all that we need to stand in his strength, give us also the grace and will to put on and wear at all

times the full Armor of God, that we may be strengthened by him to fight the good fight and win with him a crown of glory that will never spoil or fade. And pray for me that the Lord give me the words to proclaim to you the full counsel of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!