

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
Put your gear on

—Ephesians 6:10-20

In ancient warfare, among the Greeks, there were two main types of foot soldiers. The peltasts and the hoplites. Today we would call them light infantry and heavy infantry. The peltasts, the lightly armored and lightly armed foot soldiers, carried with them a light shield called a pelte and javelins for throwing. Peltasts were meant to be an agile force that threw and moved. They were not intended for heavy hand-to-hand combat. The hoplites, on the other hand, were meant to face hand-to-hand combat, fighting that was up close and in person. The hoplites carried heavy armor on their bodies. They held a large shield called a hoplon in one hand, and in the other they carried into battle a spear for thrusting. They also carried on their body a sword. Hoplites were meant to fight together in an ordered and disciplined group called a phalanx. It must have been quite a sight to see a phalanx of hoplites heading into battle, and when it worked right, it was formidable.

So when the apostle Paul, writing in Greek to a group of Christians in the city of Ephesus, wanted to prepare them for the struggles they would face living as Christians, which foot soldier do you think the apostle Paul had in mind? *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God.* The panoply of God. Everything a hoplite would put on and carry into battle, and more. That's the gear you need to put on to have a fighting chance in this struggle. The fighting is going to be up close. It's going to be personal. And your life is on the line. Put your gear on.

You must know you are at war, and you must know who you are at war with. Don't listen to the world around you that thinks of the devil as some sinister but silly character in an ancient fairy tale. The devil is real and he is active. If people deny the devil's existence, it only proves that he already has them completely under his control. The apostle Paul does not have to defend the devil's existence. Paul simply accepts the devil's existence as fact and tells us we have to be defended against the devil. *Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.*

Hmm. *The devil's schemes.* The devil's got methods, many methods. Another way of saying Martin Luther's famous "Mighty Fortress" hymn goes something like this: "The old evil foe intends serious business. Great power and a whole lot of cunning make up his formidable weaponry. On earth there is no one like him." We are not evenly matched against the devil. There is a terrible mismatch there. We are at a great disadvantage. He is too powerful and too cunning for us. He is very good, or maybe we should say very evil, at what he does.

He must be about the best people watcher in history. After he himself fell into sin and was instantly condemned by God, the devil successfully tempted the first woman and man, and he has been observing the human condition ever since for thousands of years. Now you are in his sights. He's not God. The devil can't know everything that is going on in your heart and mind. But he observes. He probes you, looking for obvious weak points, assessing your strengths, ever mindful that he just might turn your greatest strength against you into your greatest weakness. He figures out the lies that may get you—or the half lies, which are still lies. He comes up with some temptations that just may be right up your alley. In his cunning, as we learn from how he tempted Jesus, the devil may even select a Bible passage that he would like to distort in your face and thus confuse you.

The tactics he plans to use may vary. Oh, he is more than capable of carrying out a direct assault. But he may choose instead to use a feint, to get you off balance here so he can really attack you there. He can sneak around your flank and get you where you are most vulnerable at the time. He can make sharp sneak attacks, and when he does, he doesn't fight fair. He hits below the belt. He kicks, he gouges, he pokes, he bites. Or maybe he will just determine to take the long way and wear you out over time with a drawn out siege that constricts you until you give in, slowly making your worst fears come true. Attrition warfare at its worst.

Whatever the tactics, he has an overall strategy. That's clear. His goal is to knock the Word of God out of your head and the Holy Spirit out of your heart and in so doing, destroy you—eternally. He would love for you to sin greatly, grieve the Holy Spirit, and bring shame and despair upon yourself. He would love for your thinking to regress to ignorance. He would love to get you to despise God's grace, to reject salvation through faith, and replace them with your own highfalutin thoughts and your own meager attempts to bring meaning to your own life on earth and perhaps achieve some kind of positive existence in the life to come, if there is one. He wants you to give up the gospel of Jesus, the good news about your Savior. He wants to rob from you God's grace, God's love, God's peace. He wants you to end up again under the wrath of God, where you once were. In short, he wants to make you dead again. And nothing short of destroying you forever will do. That's the strategy.

And after all this, after probing you, planning how to get at you, with his overall strategy in mind, he picks a day to get at it. Paul calls it *the day of evil*. The fiery darts start flying, and the flaming arrows start shooting through the air.

The power of hell is unleashed against you. After all, the devil is not alone. He's got numbers. We're not talking about the human agents who knowingly or unknowingly do his will on earth. We are talking about legions of demons. *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* There is a whole formidable alliance in hell working against you to kill you.

So what does this look like in real life? We could look at an infinite number of situations Christians may find themselves in. For the sake of example I am going to pick one, following up on the Sunday morning Bible class we just had over the past month. A nuclear bomb is dropped on a family. A son or daughter in the family, who has been raised in Christianity, comes out as gay. A homosexual, a lesbian. Along with following the deceitful desires of the flesh, the son or daughter has been buying into the tempter's lies. "But God made you that way. This is just you being you, and there's nothing wrong with that." The Christian parents, filled with grief, possibly shock, face temptations they have never had to face before. "Do we disown our own son, our own daughter? Do we learn to accept this and approve of it in order to maintain a happy relationship with our son, our daughter?" Brothers and sisters face the dilemma of whether to side with their sibling or with Mom and Dad. And I don't think it's hyperbole to say that *the day of evil* has come to that family—to every member in that family—and the devil is doing his work. And on top of it all, this whole nuclear bomb explosion in the family may be just the first attack of many more to come. That is but one example. Your real life may vary.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. Sure is nice to have your armor on before the battle begins. If you have not yet faced the great days of evil in your life, do not get complacent. Now is the time to prepare for them. Now is the time to hear God's words, to be strengthened in faith, to really learn what the gospel is and to learn to love it more than anything else in life. We do not come to church only to find strength when we are in the heat of battle. We also come to church to get ready before the battles begin.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. We do not possess the natural strength within to deal with the devil. We do not have the inborn wits to outsmart him. We do not possess the power to defeat him. The strength, the wisdom, and the power have to come from God. They do. And they will.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. Remember our hoplite soldiers? Heavy infantry with heavy armor on, a large shield and a spear in hand, a sword strapped on the side. That's you. That's me. That's us. Spiritually speaking. With our gear on.

"Put your gear on," Paul says. And he lists what all the gear is. A belt, a breastplate, shoes, a shield, a helmet, a sword. It's all the gear of the heavy hoplite infantry, with a little bit of the fleet-footed peltast thrown in. That's the imagery. But the gear we are really putting on is *truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God.*

Brothers and sisters, we have the truth. The truth is we were dead in our sins. We were in the devil's kingdom and under his rule. Left to ourselves, we would have stayed that way. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sins—it is by the grace of God that we have been saved. In his glorious grace, God gave us Jesus, and Jesus poured out his blood for us. We now have redemption through Jesus' blood, we have the forgiveness of sins. That's the truth.

We have righteousness. No, we have no personal righteousness of our own that make us okay before God. We have righteousness as a gift from God. Before the creation of the world, God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he said, "You are going to be my sons and my daughters," and so we now are.

We have the gospel. When we didn't have the gospel, we were so far away from God. But now that God has brought the gospel into our life, we know who Jesus is and we know what he did for us. He reconciled us to God through the cross, and now we have peace with God, and we have peace with each other. That's why Paul calls it the gospel of *peace*, and that's why we put it on our feet for battle. It makes us cheerful, it makes us fast.

Brothers and sisters, we have faith. Not of ourselves, it didn't come from us. It's the gift of God. So now we've got it. We have a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so certain, that we would stake our life on it and die for it a thousand times. Because by grace, through faith, we have salvation too. We are not under the wrath of God, and we are not going to end up under the wrath of God either. Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, and in the coming ages after all this life's battles are through, we are going to see and experience the riches of God's grace to which nothing else can even compare. And to keep any man, any demon, yes, to keep the devil himself from ever taking our salvation away, we have the Word of God to swing like a weapon against any foe. Just like our Savior taught us to do. "It is written, 'Satan, so I am going to do God's will, not yours.'"

You've got your gear. Put it on! Oh, but before you go out to battle, take one more thing with you. Prayer. *Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints,* for all your fellow Christians, including your pastors. We are not alone. We all have Christ, and we have each other too. God give us the strength to fight like hoplites, to run like peltasts, and to overcome the devil. Amen.