

## **Armor of God: When the Evil Day Comes**

**April 14, 2024**

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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! We are continuing in our series of sermons on the armor of God. And it is about this time during the series that I get asked, "Are we going to hear the same Scripture passage every Sunday for eight weeks?" And the answer to that is: Yes. By the time we are done, you will love it! Paul, speaking to church of Ephesus particularly, but also to all the churches of Asia Minor, writes:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the evil day comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

May God bless the reading of the Word.

During my 40-something years of ministry, I have been called a lot of things, most of them complimentary. I think, though, the most unique thing that I have ever been called, as one of my colleagues said: "John, you are an enigma wrapped inside of a conundrum." An enigma wrapped inside of a conundrum. Now, unpack that. I think what she was trying to say was I'm complicated. And I can see that. By nature, I am a big picture person. That's how I was born. But by nurture, I am a person of details. I grew up in a very strict, very precise, military home. By nature, I see the big picture. By nurture, my life was details. So, at one and the same time, I yearn for the big picture, but I am consumed by the details. Pastor Pat and I have that in common. We like our spontaneity planned way in advance. Right, Pastor Pat? My mind is perpetually focused on the big picture, but I live in the details. In our passage, Paul gives us both the big picture and the details. Last week we looked at putting on the whole armor of God. We looked at what that looked like. And today we continue that, but today we're looking primarily at why we put on the whole armor of God. We looked at that a little bit last week, but we're going to focus on that this morning.

Paul says we put on the full armor of God to meet the evil day. We'll talk about that in a moment. In the full armor of God, we're reminded that we stand not in our own strength, and we do not put on our own armor. God is on our team. God is our strength, and we put on God's armor. We don't have to depend on our own strength to stand. It is important to put on the full armor of God because we all have weaknesses. We have points where we need extra help. And it is not a sin to have a weakness. It is a sin not to

acknowledge that weakness and give it extra protection. Now, folks, this isn't engineering; this isn't nuclear science. This is plain common sense, but sometimes common sense isn't so common. This is: If you have struggles with eating, then don't go to an all-you-can-eat buffet. It's just that simple. If you have struggles with alcohol, you probably should not be a bartender. Okay? We have our weaknesses. It's important to put on the full armor of God and acknowledge those and face those. We are reminded that we do not war, if you will, against flesh and blood. People are not our problems. (Well, kind of.) They can be the agents, but our struggle is with the evil behind. And our preparation must be constant, consistent, and persistent, because you never know when a temptation may arise, troubles may come, disaster may strike. Your life can be changed in a moment, in a flash, in a twinkling of an eye: a lightning bolt out of a clear blue sky. We've had that happen, haven't we? Paul, in verse 13, and let me read that again, says, "Therefore put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." You'll note that Paul says not "if the evil day comes," but "when the evil day comes." It's not a matter of if it will happen. It will happen. Life happens. Temptations come. Tragedies strike. And Christians are not exempt. But we do have help. We do have an advantage. God is on our team. God is on our side. Life is going to happen. Our advantage as Christians is that God is with us and will walk with us through them. He will not deliver us from them. But He will walk with us through them. Life is going to happen, but God is with us.

So, what is the evil day? There's nowhere in Scripture that says: "Here is your definition of the evil day." What I'm going to give you is how I understand it, what works for me, what has happened to me in my life. This is the gospel according to not St. John. This is what works for me. As I see the evil day, the evil day is a trap or an attack. The way I would describe it is: You're just going through life dumb and happy. Everything is going good. And then, all of a sudden, from all different angles, all kinds of troubles and trials and tribulations erupt. Have you ever been there? Everything is going good, then all of a sudden, bam. That is the evil day. I'm reminded of a call that happened years and years ago. I called up a buddy of mine, as I often do just to see how they're doing, and I called him up and I said, "Bud, how're you doing? How's the church going?" He said, "Everything is beautiful. And it scares me." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, I know Satan is out there working and I can't see him. And it bothers me!" Indeed, that happens. We're going along in life. Everything is fine and, all of a sudden, all hell breaks loose. That is the evil day. We can experience that as individuals. It can also happen to us collectively. I think of all of the things that came together to create the Great Depression. I think of all that happened to cause World War II. I think of what happened to us collectively during COVID. That is the evil day. There is another experience, too, that people sometimes call "the dark night of the soul." We experience a spiritual attack, maybe not attack from the outside, but attack from the inside. It is described as a darkness. It is described as a time when you have a very difficult time focusing on anything positive or seeing anything positive. God feels a million miles away. There is no word from God and God does not feel present. Have you ever been there? The dark night of the soul.

Paul says, "Put on the full armor of God because the evil day will come." You put on the

full armor of God so that you can stand and not fall. Now, don't mishear me. You may be shaken. You may be hurt. You may be damaged. But you come out standing, still standing. You may sustain damage, and sustaining damage is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that you have been through a battle. There's no such thing as John Wayne Christians. You remember John Wayne? A lot of you remember John Wayne. John Wayne used to go through all kinds of battles and the only thing that ever happened to him was he got dirty. Well, in the battle of life, you sustain damage and you are hurt. Paul says the goal is to come out standing. I can remember telling colleagues from time to time, when they would call and see how I was doing, I would say, "Battered, bruised, bleeding, but winning." And that's key.

Paul says, "Put on the full armor of God so that when the evil day comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and having done all, to stand." Now, we have experienced that recently, collectively, in COVID. As I see things, as I interpret things, COVID was the collective evil day. Do you remember when it first got started? You remember that? I can remember seeing these blurbs in the news about something that was going on in China. And it's over there, and I didn't pay much attention to it. And then there were reports of this mess in Seattle. I thought, "Okay, well, it's still the flu, you know? It's really not a big deal. We've had the swine flu and the bird flu and whatever stuff." And I didn't take it that seriously. And then I got contacted late one Friday afternoon that everything was shutting down. Y'all remember that? I was the male clergy on a female Walk to Emmaus when that happened. I got the news late on Friday night, and we are a couple of days into this, and we're supposed to shut down. And so we called the leadership team together, and we decided, "Well, we'll ask the ladies what they want to do." And they said, "Well, we want to stay." And so, we were already sequestered, so we stayed, and we finished it up. But then, at the end of that, you invite a whole bunch of people to come in for the closing of it. And we had to cancel that. But as the senior pastor of a large church, I had even greater problems. That particular Sunday we were supposed to close was Youth Sunday. And our church absolutely adored Youth Sunday. It was the Sunday when our youth did absolutely everything. And I had been working with them for about five weeks getting them ready to do both services. I knew that I knew that I knew we would have between 550 and 575 people there that Sunday to hear those kids and participate in that service. Am I going to take that away from those kids? So, this is what we did: We did cancel the service, but we let the kids do the service and bring their parents, their grandparents and their close relatives and their best friends. And we went from a service of 550 to two services of 25 each. And I can remember thinking, "Well, maybe two weeks. Maybe three." And then it was a month. And then we were bumping up against Easter. And I said, "There is no way that they're going to cancel Easter." I mean, we are an Easter people. Without Easter there is no church. We cannot cancel Easter. And we canceled Easter. And then we canceled two Easters, and it severely hampered a third Easter. I didn't believe it could happen. I didn't believe it would happen. But it did happen. And that is a definition of the evil day, collectively and also individually.

Now, I want to say something about Central. You don't know this, but you came out of COVID in much better shape than most other churches. Did you know that? Both churches who continued to meet, and churches that shut down, you came out better

than most. And that is a credit to the Reverend Kim Fields, his team, and this church. And that is a credit to what we did as we were coming out of COVID. And you are to be congratulated for that. That is battered, bruised, bleeding, but still winning. That's the evil day. The unbelievable happens to us collectively. It happens to us individually. We experience the evil day when a trap is sprung. We experience the dark night of the soul when everything seems to be darkness. And the time to prepare for that is now. Don't ever put it off. It is a consistent and persistent, continual preparation, so that not if it happens, but when it happens, we will be ready.

Now, we don't know the future. We have no clue, When we were planning this sermon series in August last year, we knew things were going to happen in 2024. We knew that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church would happen. That's coming up in two weeks. We knew that Annual Conference is going to be here. That is happening in June. We knew that in November there's going to be a little thing called a presidential election. All of these things have the potential of having an impact on us, or on us as a society. We have no secret knowledge. There is no conspiracy going on out there. The Pastoral Leadership Team is not a part of the Illuminati. Okay? There is not something that we're not telling you. What I know that I know that I know is that life is going to happen. And we must be prepared for whatever it is, so that we can stand. We might get beat up; we might get bloodied; but in the end--I've read the last chapter of the Book--we're going to win it. So remember, you may be experiencing right now the evil day or the dark night of the soul. The goal is to stand your ground. Come out standing. Are you ready? You don't face this alone. God is with you. God gives you tools to use. And your brothers and sisters in Christ, that are sitting around you right now, stand with you as well. Let's pray.

Lord, we are so, so very grateful that we do not have to go through life by ourselves, but we travel on this path with You. We use the armor and the tools that You give us. And we have our brothers and sisters in Christ who surround us. We do not have to stand alone. But Lord, help us every day to prepare ourselves for what may happen. In Jesus' name, amen.