

Armor of God: Breastplate of Righteousness

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Good morning! This morning we're going to be in Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 18, as we continue our series through the armor of God. This Wednesday I asked our Alpha group, "What's the hardest part of the service on Sunday morning, in terms of it all coming together?" And it's the announcements. But I'm starting to discover, at least from my perspective, the Kids' Moment is by far more intimidating than the announcements! We're going to read from Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 18. If you could, would you stand with me as we read from God's Word?

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints." This is the Word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Would you please be seated?

Red Air! Red Air! Red Air! One one Sierra November Victor. Two six nine eight three. Two four four nine seven. We were at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, again, an entire U.S. Army brigade: 4000 soldiers, 400 tracked vehicles and 800 wheeled vehicles, all moving through the desert on the attack against the equivalent number of opposing forces. It's a sight to behold! I was a young cadet and had been assigned to the armored battalion out of Montana as an intelligence analyst. I was sitting at the map board as the words echoed across the command post. It was not good. Somewhere out there was an enemy aircraft--an aircraft that had been committed to a mission. Its target had already been selected and it was on its way. It wasn't hunting. It wasn't looking for a target. By this point in its attack, its pilot knew where it was going and what it was going to kill. I wrote down the grid coordinate and used it to plot the symbol on the map for enemy aircraft. The Master Sergeant tapped me on the shoulder. He was responsible, as the senior enlisted soldier, for the operations of that command post. He tapped me on the shoulder, and he said, "We don't plot those, Cadet." I gave him a funny look, and he replied, "They're moving too fast. There's no point in putting them on the map." I looked at my buddy who was sitting at the four radios inside our tracked vehicle, and he just shrugged.

Our tracked vehicle was one of five M-577 Command-Post Carriers. She was a modified version of the M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier, and she had been introduced into service in 1962. Even as an upgrade, she was old, and she was slow. Her 1.8 inches of aluminum armor was starting to feel real thin. Playing the part of the bad guy was the A-10 Thunderbolt II, commonly referred to as the Warthog or simply the Hog. In a real situation, it would be carrying six Maverick air-to-ground missiles and the Avenger

30-millimeter rotating cannon. Any of these would make short work of even our best armored vehicle, the M1 Abrams tank. Ironically, the A-10 pilot is protected by what is called the titanium bathtub. At its thickest point, it had an armor of 1.5 inches. But even that 1.5 inches was better than the 1.8 inches of aluminum I was trying to hide behind. No, 1.8 inches might have well been the canvas top of a convertible Mustang, for all the good it was going to do us. Then it came again. Red Air! Red Air! Red Air! One one Sierra November Victor. Two seven nine eight six. Two three four nine two. The grid was different. It was moving. It was moving fast. I wrote the grid down and then found the location on the map and drew the symbol. "I told you we don't plot those because they're moving too fast!" scolded the Master Sergeant. But I had drawn a straight line between the two plots and extended it out in the direction of right over the top of our location. "Master Sergeant," I said, "it's coming right for us!" I got up from the map board at this point and ran towards my tracked vehicle. I climbed over my buddy, headed towards the center of the vehicle where the top hatch was. By the time I got there, opened the hatch, and stuck my head out so I could see, the Warthog was making its attack. It came over a low point in two hills and down along the ridge that we were trying to hide behind. And just at the last minute it flared, and every flare on the side of that airplane came off. You could just see it arcing through the sky. That was the symbol for "You had just been attacked, and you're now dead."

The referees jumped into action, indicating which of the five vehicles were catastrophically destroyed and which ones weren't. My 577 somehow escaped, but now the referee was standing beside my armored vehicle shouting at me, "You'd better react, Cadet!". I had no idea what to do. Was that thing coming back around? I had a rifle, but my little M16 was just a peashooter. It couldn't penetrate the titanium bathtub on the Warthog. Again, ironically, that thing had more armor on it than I did. It was capable of flying with an entire wing gone. I'm pretty sure my M16 couldn't do that. I looked around sheepishly and decided to close the hatch. "I'm serious, Cadet! You better react." What am I supposed to do? I looked around sheepishly again and decided to grab my helmet. I made eye contact with the referee as I snapped it into place. "That's it, Cadet. You're dead." The reality was there was nothing I could do. My armor was insufficient.

How's your armor this morning? Is it sufficient for the battle you find yourself in? Make no mistake: You're in a battle--a battle not of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. What does that mean? That means that you are in a battle for your very soul. Is your armor sufficient?

Isaiah, in the Old Testament, describes an imminent attack, an attack as imminent as that attack of the A-10, an attack more devastating, more powerful and destructive than anything we mere humans can employ on today's modern battlefield. "One day," Isaiah writes, "God will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head. He will put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrap Himself in zeal as a cloak. And according to our deeds, so will He repay wrath to His adversaries, repayment to His enemies." John writes in Revelation, speaking about Jesus's return, "Behold, He is coming with the clouds." Red Air! Red Air! Red Air! "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him. And all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him." If your armor is not ready, if your armor is insufficient, then on that day dread will seize you and you will wail. "On that day He shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. And He shall

strike the earth with the rod of His mouth; and with the breath of His lips He shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His waist and faithfulness the belt of His loins.”

I'll ask again: Are you prepared? Is your armor sufficient? More likely, your armor is like mine, battered and beaten--battered and beaten by the things that batter us most, those things that place our very souls in jeopardy before this coming day, battered by our own unrighteousness and ungodliness. Have you dishonored God? Do you honor Him and give Him thanks? Do you claim to be wise before Him? Have you exchanged the glory of the mortal God for something less--money, fame, power, control? Is your heart full of all things evil, covetous, impure, dishonoring, deceitful, or grotesque in its passions? Is there even one trace of malice present in your heart? Do you gossip, slander, long for murder, sow strife or maliciousness? Do you refuse to acknowledge God out of hateful insolence? Are you haughty and boastful? Have you disobeyed your parents or failed in any way to honor them? Do you ruthlessly and heartlessly invent evil? Do you give approval to any people who do? And I didn't make this list up. It's from Romans, the first chapter, as Paul lays out his argument. Each one of these things is devastating by itself and in and of itself. These are not fiery darts. These are the depleted uranium rounds of a 30-millimeter rotary cannon. Are they finding themselves penetrating your armor? And yet, some of our righteousness has been marred, not by one but by many of these shortfalls.

This is the fourth week in our series on the whole armor of God. And last week Pastor John presented to us the belt of truth. He anchored us on the truth of Jesus. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus. He did not come into the world to condemn the world, though that condemnation is coming. But 2000 years ago, Jesus came in order that the world might be saved through Him. And He has done just that. That is the truth. Can you know all truth? No, but you can know this truth: Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. He was buried and He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. This was the plan from the beginning of time. Early in the history of redemption, God promised that He would firmly establish His covenant with us in such a way that we would know that He is God. He tells us that we will remember our past lives and face the shame of it, but that when He makes atonement for us, makes everything right after all we have done, we will find ourselves speechless. Every one of us is guilty of something on that list, if not everything on that list. Jesus firmly established His covenant, His covenant of peace, with His body and His blood. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” “Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” When you begin to understand this, there is only one thing left: speechlessness.

And yet, I would argue that most of us in this room have accepted that truth. And yet, consistently we fall for the lie that we should be saved because we have done something or somehow we deserve it. The first big lie of the devil is that you deserve to be saved, and the second is that you earn your own salvation. A bishop in the Anglican Church once wrote, “Much popular theology and Christian devotion is based on this idea that someday, perhaps not in this world and only after a long purgation, we shall reach a condition in which God will be able to approve of us as we are in ourselves.”

This is a fatal theological error. A time will never come when we shall be able to depend on our own righteousness. To the end of all eternity, the highest situation to which we can aspire is that which we already have: that of sinners saved by grace.

Do you want to stand firm? Do you want to stand firm on that truth? Then don't reflect too much on your own failures. And don't reflect too much on your own success. Do not consider yourself good enough, or even good. Rather, think on what has been given to you. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." The only righteousness in which we can find any hope is the righteousness of God. Paul implored his readers, "On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Tighten that belt of truth and fasten to it the breastplate of God's righteousness. Is Satan telling you you're not good enough? Is Satan telling you that you're better? Is Satan telling you that you deserve to be saved? You look him right in the eye and you tell him, "Jesus Christ is good enough and He deserves to be saved. And He has promised to bring me with Him." Confess your sins to Jesus, and take your place, and stand, belt of truth cinched and breastplate of righteousness in place.

I once heard a story, the story of Terri Schafer. Late in the summer she already had in mind a special Christmas gift that she wanted to purchase for her husband. Her fear was that it might be too expensive. It wouldn't be too expensive for most families, but her husband was a police officer, and they were on a tight budget. But she knew what she wanted, and she wandered along Fifth Avenue searching for it, hoping to find what she had in mind. Sure enough, she did. She slipped into the store and looked into the face of the shopkeeper and asked, "How much?" He responded, "\$127.50." And she knew she couldn't afford it. She said to him, "Though we don't know each other, perhaps you would allow me to put it on hold. I can pay a little now. And then at the end of October, I will come and pay you some more. And I promise you: By the time you have it gift-wrapped for Christmas, I will pay the last penny." A seasoned businessman, he knew a trusting soul when he saw one, so he smiled and said, "I'll tell you what. Since your husband is a police officer, I have every reason to trust you. Why don't you just give me the first payment. I'll gift-wrap it and let you take it with you today." She was elated. She walked out with a wonderful gift. She was so anxious to give it to him, she couldn't wait until Christmas. That night as David, her husband, unwrapped the gift, Terry stood beaming. He was thrilled at her thoughtfulness and covered her with hugs and kisses. "What a wonderful gift!" On October 1st, that same year, Patrolman David Schafer was working with the night shift and got the call. A drugstore robbery was in process. Racing to the scene, he arrived just in time to observe the suspect getting into his car, starting the engine, and speeding away. Quickly, David switched on his siren and began the pursuit. Three blocks later the vehicle suddenly pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. The driver was still seated behind the wheel of his car as David cautiously approached. As he got about three feet from the driver's door, it flew open and the suspect fired an automatic pistol, sending a 45-caliber slug towards David's stomach. At seven o'clock the next morning, Terri answered the door of the Schafers' home. Carefully and calmly the police officer explained David had been shot while trying to apprehend a robbery suspect. When she listened to the story, Terri was thinking how glad she was she didn't wait until Christmas to give her gift. How glad she was the shopkeeper had been willing to let her pay for it later. Otherwise David Schafer, shot at point-blank range with a devastatingly deadly 45-caliber pistol round, would surely have

died. Her husband was alive and only badly bruised, because he had been given the gift of a brand-new bulletproof vest.

And that's why Christ came: to give us a vest of righteousness, to pay the price with His blood, that He might protect us with a shield that sin can never penetrate. Do you know what you have been given? Let us pray.

Lord, from the dawn of time, it has been Your plan that You would stand between our unrighteousness and Your righteousness. On the day You died on the cross, You took on the penalty for all of our sin; and now, Lord, we stand not in our own righteousness but in Your righteousness. On the day we go before the righteous Judge, we can stand in the knowledge that not only will we survive, but You will welcome us into Your kingdom as one of Your sons and daughters. Lord, I'm speechless. Amen.