

Aug 23      Chained Yet Strong

Ephesians 6:10-20

I need to admit something. When I have read this passage from Ephesians I tend to read verses 10-17 about putting on the whole armor of God and skim the rest. I have preached often about what it means to put on the armor of God. This year as I was reading this passage I actually paid attention to the last three verses. It ends with Paul proclaiming that he is an ambassador in chains for the sake of the Gospel. As I thought about that phrase, “ambassador in chains”, I began to realize that the conversation he had been having about putting on the whole armor of God actually illuminates his present circumstances. He was sharing how he was remaining strong and faithful in such a trying situation. Today I want us to look at that connection for we, like Paul, find ourselves in difficult places at times in our lives and we need the strength and confidence to remain faithful.

When we hear the word “ambassador” we tend to think about the current definition of that term. An ambassador today is an official representative of their country. It is usually a position of great honor and at times some power. The word ambassador comes from a Latin word that is best translated as servant because the one who was sent to proclaim a message was considered to be serving the wishes and will of the one they represented. They had no power. The person that they represented expected his ambassador’s words to be heeded. If his words were ignored the ambassador was often put in chains, imprisoned, and sometimes killed as a sign that the hearer would not be intimidated. So, when Paul proclaims himself to be an ambassador in chains he is saying to his listeners: “I am a servant of God, sent to share the Good News about Jesus. They have rejected my message so I am asking you to pray for me so that I remain faithful to the task I have been given.” He realized that to the world it appears he has failed in his mission. He doesn’t want the Christian faithful to become discouraged. He feels he still has a mission to accomplish and so he wants strength and confidence to continue living the role of an ambassador even when he is in chains.

How does this understanding of his purpose and situation inform the discussion he had just had about putting on the whole armor of God? First we need to see that the

armor, as Paul is talking about it, is designed to help folks stand fast. We are not asked to put on this armor so we are ready for some aggressive action. Soldiers don armor now and then when they are going into harm's way. It is to protect them as they go into battle. Paul instead sees us needing to be protected so that we can stand fast, another term would be, remain faithful when the weight of the world comes crushing down upon us. He talks about it in terms such as cosmic darkness and tricks of the devil. We are not asked to attack those forces. God will do that. We are asked to be faithful in the face of temptation, manipulation, and coercion which is so much a part of living.

Are you beginning to see how Paul's discussion about armor connects to his situation? When you are in chains all the forces of the world are arrayed against you. It is easy to give into the temptation to just "go with the flow." To stand on your principals, to not give in, means a much more difficult time for you and at times for those around you. You have to be strong to stand fast in such situations. Paul, in telling others to put on the whole armor of God, implies that this is what he has done and continues to need to do if he is to remain faithful as an ambassador in chains. He even says to them to stay alert by praying for all believers. Let us see how some of these pieces of armament would help Paul, and help us, as we struggle to remain faithful.

Paul begins by saying "stand", see there is that word again, "with the belt of truth around your waist". When we are under pressure from family, friends and even strangers to modify our words to make them comfortable for them we sometimes need to be reminded that we are called to speak the truth. It doesn't mean we have to be aggressive or abusive in our truth telling. Sometimes this is how people perceive the gospel needs to be shared. But is a reminder that it is easy to be deflected from truthfulness because it might bring hard consequences. Paul ends this passage by asking them to pray that the Lord will give him the confidence to say what he has to say or to speak the truth.

This is so hard to do, especially with family. When you have loved ones who do not go to church they often try to get you to say, by words or action, that church is unimportant. It is subtle like, "You don't have to go to church do you?" or "We don't say

grace when we sit down to eat. I am sure that isn't a problem or is it?" We all need to stay alert and have people pray that we put on daily the belt of truth.

Many translations when it comes to the breastplate translate the Greek word as righteousness. Recently I have seen some new versions translate it as justice. I like this translation because I think it gets closer to the meaning it would have had for Paul. What would it mean to have Justice as your breastplate? A breastplate is for protection. We would expect to be protected by justice. In some ways Paul, I am sure, was feeling let down on this account and feeling the need for justice. Rome was famous for its law and justice. He was a Roman citizen and was guaranteed justice. Yet he was in prison. He was not getting justice from the Romans who prized it. When we feel life is treating us unfairly or that something is unjust it is so easy to get angry and/or bitter. Paul, in talking about this realized that ultimate justice is from God. That is your protection. There is where you need to pin your hopes. This allows you, when you are feeling like you are being treated unjustly, being an ambassador in chains as in Paul's case, to not be discouraged because you know that no matter how this situation is resolved God is with you and God's justice will ultimately prevail.

We have time for one more piece of armor. You will have to reread this passage for yourself and see how the others can help you in the challenging times of faith. Paul talks about the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. As I thought about this I saw this relating directly to first the conversation about standing firm in the Lord's strength. Even more, I see a connection in the ending where Paul wants all to pray for each other and for him to be faithful. Faith allows you to stand up to those who challenge you. The shield of faith, in my way of thinking of it, is the prayers we say for each other. It is the community of faith that comes together to support one another, to encourage one another and help one another. This is our greatest resource. It is tough to be a person of faith by yourself. But when you come to church each week and find the support of others, know you are prayed for as you pray for others, it becomes much easier to stand up to the world. You know you are not alone. You know you are loved. You know that others think and believe as you do. It allows you to say no to the temptations of the world. It is your shield and strength.

Paul knew that he might die at any time. He knew he was facing injustice. Life was challenging. But what Paul wanted was prayers so that he might open his mouth and share the Gospel. He wanted that shield of faith. This should be our prayer as well. We as a church are called to maintain strength, wearing the "armor of God," in order to pray that "the mystery of the gospel" will be proclaimed. An ambassador in chains has little likelihood that his mission will be a success. It seems after the grand plan that Paul is a failure. And yet we know he wins. When we are facing dark and difficult times we need to focus on how God is with us, protecting us, while praying for wisdom and confidence. It is this that gives us strength. Life presents challenges, God is with us, and true strength comes not from our resources but from God.

In one of my churches a man had grown up with a father who was anti-church. He belittled his mother for going to church and teased his son every time he went with his mother. This negativity had its effect and after a while he quit attending. But his mom did not. She went with his sister and when she quit she went alone. She went each week faithfully. Whenever dad put her faith down she just smiled and said something about I love you and so does God. Mom's faithful witness finally got to him. In college he started attending a college Christian group. He met a woman in that group and they married and he had been in the church all his life. Dad never changed. He still grieved for his hardness of heart. But mom was his example of one who put on the armor of God. Refused to let the forces of the world change her or deflect her and it ultimately changed his life. She was his ambassador in chains and her faithful witness challenged him daily to be faithful and encouraging of those who were struggling. May we realize God gives us tools to also share the gospel in good and challenging times.