

THE SEVENTH PROTECTION

As I hope you noticed last Sunday: With this passage in the sixth chapter of Ephesians, it is easy to get focused on the belt and the breastplate and the shoes, and forget what Paul is actually talking about. That is, the imagery is so much fun to play with – and so applicable to so many things – that we can get off on any tangent we like and forget that Paul is talking about spiritual warfare. Today we will want to add the shield, the helmet, and the sword. Only, we do not want to become terrorists – or even soldiers in the usual physical sense. But we *are* physical creatures, so the imagery of warfare and armor, if we are not careful, can easily sidetrack us. At least it often has in the past. It is easy for us to get our aggressiveness triggered, and consciously or unconsciously start thinking about causes or crusades or problems we may be having with various individuals, institutions, or organizations. Some of us would love to have God “armor us” so we could march into some fray of our own choosing and be invincible, victorious, and heroic – and perhaps become famous, and hopefully rich, in the process. Such thoughts, of course, have never crossed *my* mind. But you should be warned and wary: that has nothing to do with what Paul is talking about.

Paul has specifically stated that our fight is not against human foes. It is against “***principalities and powers.***” Are any of you remembering (from the class on the Book of Revelation, perhaps) that these are technical terms for two of the nine choirs of angels? The facts are not available to us (as facts), but we are into the mythology, and maybe the truth, of first-century Judaism and Christianity. Some of the angels from each layer or category of angels have fallen, and they are following Lucifer (of the Seraphim, the highest layer of angels) into pride and rebellion. There is no time for the details here, but that makes the passage doubly fascinating. Specifically, it makes it clear that this armor imagery is not intended for our pet peeves or causes, or for our battles with one another. In fact, the passage reminds us that our human foes are *also* caught in Satan’s bondage, even as we ourselves often are, and that *all of us* need to be freed, not pitted against each other. Indeed, it is the work and purpose of Jesus Christ to free us from this very bondage.

Then let us be clear and keep clear: It is classic Christian wisdom that we live in a fallen, imperfect, rebellious dimension. This world is not Heaven! Things are not running here the way God designed and

created them to run. All of us participate in this mayhem at all times, at least to some degree. We do not fully understand who we are or what we are here for. We do not comprehend the true worth or value of each other. This is basic Christian theology, 1-A. In this realm, we are separated – alienated from our Creator – to some degree, at all times. We “*see through a glass darkly.*” (I Corinthians 13:12) “*We have done those things which we ought not to have done – and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done.*” (Prayer of Confession) Not completely – not totally – but always to some degree. There is mist and confusion in our prayers, and therefore in our primary relationships. We do not know God fully. We do not trust God freely and completely. We do not submit to or obey God with willing, childlike trust in all things and in all our affairs. Yet life will not, and cannot, run right unless or until the creatures know, trust, love, and obey their Creator. Abou Ben Adhem (James Henry Leigh Hunt) thinks we can learn to love our neighbors and skip learning to love God. But that has not been working out very well on our planet so far.

We keep forgetting this primary condition (known formally in some circles as “The Fall”). So sometimes we get shocked when we encounter trouble or evil. Sometimes we are amazed when we make mistakes. Sometimes we experience injustice, sorrow, failure, or defeat – and we act surprised, as if we thought this wouldn’t or couldn’t or shouldn’t happen ... at least not to us. Where do we think we are? In Heaven?! And *who* do we think we are? The saved and fully developed who have no need of a Savior?

Strangely enough, we do keep forgetting. Is it the mark of our origins? The soul – the spirit within – is created by God, and it does not ever quite get used to this realm. Some spirit-origin seems to linger. The evidence of our true design is quite strong within us, and it creates many problems for us here. We *do* innately think things “should” be perfect. Where does that come from? We do instinctively think *we* should be perfect. What incredible audacity! Yet we cannot shake it. We are ever discontent, and we long for a “home” we have never seen ... for love we have never known ... to be what we have never been.

Mariana, in former years, had a tendency to be late – I mean always, and to everything. It used to annoy me, especially when I was so self-centered that I thought she did it to annoy me. It took me years to learn never to go with her if I wanted to be on time. Then finally it dawned on me what the missing link was: Her soul could not fathom the idea of

needing time to travel. She was ready to go when it was time to be there. Some residue of the spirit realm in her expected to transport from place to place instantaneously. Her mind did not want to remember or face the grim fact that ... the wings were gone. They were not supposed to be gone! How enormously painful to have to realize that they were. All of us have some places in our lives where we simply cannot or will not admit that we are where we are ... with the wings gone. "I don't like these problems, therefore I shouldn't have to have them."

Is that why so many of us fill our schedules too full? We keep forgetting; we keep expecting to accomplish a week's work in a single day. And sometimes we try to love too many people too well, or we go through times when we try to run away from all of it because it's so frustrating and painful, so hard to manage ... with the wings gone.

In the same manner, it is hard to remember that all our loved ones will die here, and that we ourselves will not be here for very long. We hear it and watch it going on all around us all our lives. We know it's true. But our minds simply do not want to remember it in a calm, rational manner. So we forget ... and then we get devastated by the most obvious and certain fact in all the world. God has never ever hinted or promised that we could escape death in its many forms over and over and over in this world. If we had time, we could go around the room and every single person here could tell stories of near misses and close calls. Yet we keep acting shocked, angry, and surprised by death – as if we were already in the eternal realms. We still think and act as if there were some way to find security and safety here. How strange! And yet, is it not one of the clearest hints of our true origin and destiny ... that we are surprised by death?

Well, we could and maybe we should go on about this trouble we have remembering where we are. My point, however, is that whether *we* remember it or not, it is Paul's perspective. It is classic Christian wisdom that we live in a realm that has trouble remembering – trouble knowing and obeying its Creator. It is also certain, in Christian teachings, that this alienation is a reflection of warfare and conflict between the forces of destruction and the powers of life; between the powers of darkness and the powers of light; between the satanic legions and God's faithful people. Only, we keep trying to make it all seem so big and wicked and ridiculous ... so we won't have to understand it. Every single time I want to do things my own way for my own reasons, I am satanic – I am

following Satan's lead. It is as simple as that. Satan is just a cosmic prodigal son – a higher-dimensional spoiled brat.

Every time any of us want to do things our own way instead of God's way, we serve Satan and strengthen his kingdom. It is as simple as that. I do not have to kill a thousand people in cold blood to be satanic. At any moment in any day, I can say yes when I should have said no, or no when I should have said yes, or either one without even asking what the Spirit wants – and I am off track, out of the Light, no longer obedient. No evil is intended – at least not consciously or on purpose. Probably no evil is intended from Satan's perspective either. We just want our own way. "What's wrong with that?" we say "innocently." Well, for one thing, it is destroying us – destroying all life on this planet. "But we're going to die anyway." True, so now we want to deserve it? Live as if that were our aim?

It is not only Christian wisdom that Satan is largely in control in our realm (or world), but that most human beings are only dimly or partially aware of it. That is, we know the ways in which we are unhappy, lonely, angry, afraid, etc. But in spite of all that, we seem to be only dimly conscious of our bondage. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that we become aware of our distance and alienation from God. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that we become aware of our slavery to satanic principles, individual power, control, autonomy, privilege. We even think that our real problem is that we have not learned to be better and more effective at getting our own way. So we actually spend a lot of time and energy trying to get better at that. And as the old saying put it: "Practice makes perfect."

The whole human race tends to be in denial of its real disease and danger. At least that is the Christian perspective and belief. And Christianity goes on to talk about a Savior – a deliverer from this sin, this bondage. The normal and expected reaction to the Christian Message is: "You're crazy! I don't need a Savior. All I need, if indeed I will admit that I need anything, is a little more money, a little more power, a little more authority. Then I'd be just fine. Then I'd be happy. Then I wouldn't have any of these fears or this anger or the imperfections or problems any more. So if you want to do something for me, if you really care, if you really love me – like you Christians are always talking about – why don't you give me some food, money, power, or something

useful? But keep your Jesus. I don't need a Savior! I'm not under any bondage!"

Christians have been hearing that refrain, from those clearly caught in this world's bondage, for as far back as we can remember. Strangely enough, today you can hear it from inside the church almost as much as you can outside the church.

And no, that is not terribly surprising either. Satan is a great strategist. First, a campaign to get people to disbelieve in his existence. The best technique for doing that is to get us to think we are too intelligent and too in control of our own lives to believe in him. Second, get us to believe that our real problems are because of other people, not because of our own bondage to Satan. Thirdly, confuse, divide and, if possible, silence or ridicule any voices that know what's going on. That will just about do it, don't you think? Then the whole world can go to Hell, with everybody working harder and harder to do more and more good against all the bad guys. And that way, nobody will ever figure out what really went wrong. So we will keep revising the bylaws, electing new leaders, starting new groups and movements, and trying to punish those who do not help or cooperate. But no matter how well we do it or how hard we try, it will not have any impact on our real problem: being out of touch with our Creator – being disobedient and rebellious toward God. It used to be called "dying in your sin." But that was when people knew that "sin" meant alienation or separation from God.

The loss of the awareness of the presence of God is the root of all evil. No good can grow or last in Godless soil. All problems and all evil trace to the Source. All true healing and hope trace to the Source also. There is animosity and alienation between us and God, and it needs healing – reconciling. Everything else will straighten if that straightens. That is why the Reconciler came. It is also why His impact has been so huge. It is also why the world has hated Him so much, and felt so threatened by His coming. Is it not amazing that a Man with no weapon in His hand – no coercion except persuasion and invitation – could create such fear and opposition and anger and hatred? We could all be happy atheists, perhaps – if we had not seen the response to His coming.

Paul sees it, and tries to help us see it. He wants us to wear the full armor of God so that Satan cannot take away our freedom and get us back under his bondage. That is the purpose of the armor Paul is talking about: to keep us protected against Satan's efforts to get us back under

his control. Satan will try to do that by making us feel guilty and worthless – or by making us feel important and self-sufficient. Either way will work just fine. Satan will do that by making us feel discouraged, depressed, and useless – or by making us feel strong, invulnerable, and proud. Either way will work just fine. Satan will do that by making us feel terribly afraid – or by convincing us that there is nothing to fear. Either way will work just fine.

So Paul says we should put on the armor. And now the function of the armor comes pretty clear. TAKE UP THE SHIELD OF FAITH against the flaming darts of the evil one – the accusations, the guilt, the fear, the discouragement. The shield of faith means, “God loves me because of the way God is, not because of my merit.” That is made absolutely clear on the Cross. And indeed, no dart can stick or burn against that conviction. Jesus revealed what God is really like. It does not depend upon us. Satan has no weapon against justification by faith. “*Above all,*” says Paul, “*take up the shield of faith*” – faith in Jesus Christ that allows you to know for sure that the distance between you and God is not God’s idea, desire, judgment, or punishment. God wants you – loves you. The words are old, but the heart that finally believes them is released from Satan’s grip, and protected from every dart Satan can hurl. *Above all, take up the shield of faith:* Justification by faith, not by works – not by merit, success, bank account, good deeds, heredity, nationality, or correct political views, but by faith in God’s undeserved, unearned love. You are God’s child. Awaken. Believe it. Trust it.

And TAKE THE HELMET OF SALVATION. Nobody likes to wear a helmet. They are hot and heavy. They limit the feeling of freedom and of being part of the vast scenery all around you. Whether you ride a motorcycle or a bike, or climb, or play soccer, nobody likes to wear a helmet. But the sane, the alert, the aware end up doing so. Why? Because it is better than getting your head beat in.

The helmet of salvation: The sure and certain awareness that you are going to be okay. I am obviously not talking about this world, or normal human ways of evaluating who has “made it” or with what kinds of toys. God is not only love but POWER. And if God loves you, God will save you – meaning, your place in the eternal family is assured and guaranteed. If we do not know that, Satan will beat our heads in. That is exactly what Paul means! Where do we wear a helmet? Satan will beat our heads in with fear, anxiety, endless doubts, and images

of horrid things happening. It is when we are frightened that we do our worst deeds, trying vainly to protect ourselves from things real or imagined – and if we are frightened enough, we do not care how. *Take up the helmet of salvation.* To get it simple: You are never supposed to be saying or thinking, “IF I get to Heaven.” You are supposed to *know* it – not because you do so well, but because *Jesus* does so well. Why has it taken two thousand years to get this clear? Taking up the helmet of *maybe* or *I might* is no helmet! Not even a good beanie. And certainly it cannot protect you from Satan’s blows.

And TAKE UP THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD. Here is the famous imagery so used and misused in the Book of Revelation. Our weapon is the WORD. You can think Paul means the Bible if you want to, but that is not correct. You know how much I keep after you to read and study the Bible, so it is tempting to use this passage for a little backup and extra incentive. But that is not what Paul means. He is talking about the living MESSAGE of God’s love and power – his purpose and plans – and their application to anyone who will receive it. The WORD converts. The WORD brings light and hope. The WORD turns us from Satan, or Self, toward God.

Well, a number of people who have been given this “sword” of the WORD – like Paul and Luke and Mark and John – *did* write things that got into the Bible. And those of us who study it are endlessly grateful for their efforts. Only, this passage is about YOU taking the sword. Is there any way around that? This passage is about YOU speaking the MESSAGE of Light and Hope – to somebody, somewhere. Is there any way around that? Is Paul saying: Hey, I carry the sword of the Word as well as I know how, so you don’t have to? Hey, let your minister do it – he gets paid to? Hey, go to Barnes & Noble – there’s a whole section on religion there? Read the article in *Newsweek* that I just read? Watch the television special I just heard about? NONE OF IT WILL DO. None of it even comes close. Accept, take up, and put on the helmet and the sword. It is *your* armor – *your* sword! God provides, but it is given to YOU.

The Bible can help, but it cannot do it for you. Some of you have been spectators long enough. Time to stick your own neck out. Time to trust that God will give you the words you need to speak when it is your turn to bear witness. Time to know that the Spirit wants to speak through you when you are called before courts, councils, Satan’s servants, your mate, your children, your boss, your friends, whomever.

You do not have to blather all the time – or to everyone – like the neophytes sometimes do. But be alert to the Spirit’s touch, and be willing to speak when you are asked to. And get alert enough so that it only takes a touch, not a two-by-four between the eyes. By the way, Paul writes this when he himself is about to face the Roman Emperor (Nero, it will turn out) in the scariest and most important trial of his life. That is clearly on his mind, and he is counting on this sword, not on his own eloquence. He is counting on the Spirit’s inspiration.

Paul apparently lost this court battle, and his life. Which does not mean that the Spirit failed to speak eloquently through him. The Spirit persuades but does not coerce. How I wish we had an account of this scene and speech. Apparently no one “on our side” survived to tell of it. But we can be pretty sure that Paul was not surprised by whatever happened. He knew he lived in a broken world. He knew how much the world needed to know Christ. They go together. And Paul would have died by now, in this world, no matter what the Roman Emperor had decided back then. So the only thing that really mattered was his staying faithful. And he knew that too. Do we?

I must draw your attention to one more thing. There are six items which Paul calls “the whole armor of God”: the belt, the breastplate, the shoes ... the shield, the helmet, the sword. Six is a good number for protection with physical affairs, but seven is the holy number. Seven is the number of spiritual power. There are seven archangels; seven rays of light; seven days in the week, and the Sabbath, or seventh, is the holy day. There are seven moving lights, and seven candles represent them in all biblical history. Seven is the number of spiritual power. Do you really think Paul is going to leave you with six protections? Paul is Pharisee through and through, by his own word, and he is rabbinically trained and spiritually very aware, experienced, and faithful. Do you really think Paul is going to leave you with six protections?

Paul designed his list with seven protections from the beginning, though many have missed it. In such a list, the seventh is always the last, the most important, and the most powerful item of all. All the other armor will be dependent upon it – will be *activated* by it. In fact, without the seventh protection, the rest of the armor – instead of making you essentially invulnerable – will only weigh you down and discourage you. I have told you a little bit about the six protections. But you really should pay the most attention of all to the seventh protection.