



Worship: Preparation
Ephesians 6:10-20
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Over the past month, we've looked at worship through the lens of the letter to the Ephesians. We've talked about worship as a time of praise, prayer, and peace; we've considered the invitation to engage in the work of maintaining unity through worship; and we've seen how worship offers a time for confession and conversion.

Using the letter to the Ephesians, we've acknowledged how the apostle proclaims the promise of God in Jesus Christ for the created humanity, and then uses that promise as the foundational invitation for us to claim our identity as a unified people gifted and invited to share in the work of God in the world.

Did you catch that? The work of worship, our engagement in worship, our participation in prayer, praise, peace, unity, confession, and conversion is not for the purpose of self-admiration or personal glorification. Ultimately, our engagement in worship – at any time, in any space, in whatever means worship may take place (whether virtually or in person) – worship is designed to lead us, to prepare us to share in the work of God in the world. For all that worship is, for all the core components that make up worship, in its fullness, worship is a time of preparation.

Whether designated as a time of the week on Sunday mornings, or perhaps in a weekend retreat, or even during a morning prayer break, worship offers a time of preparation.

As we conclude the letter to the Ephesians, we find this statement of preparation made plain and clear.

Just a bit of housekeeping as we dive in to the text in Ephesians 6:10-20.

This text is perhaps one of the more commonly read texts in the letter to the Ephesians, if not in all of the New Testament letters. Especially for our nation, as we are a nation that prides itself in its militaristic force, centering the call to faith on the tools of the military is an invitation many an American Christian loves to hear. Only, for all those who love this text because of its militaristic connection, the text actually offers quite the opposite invitation. If anything, the apostle is using this text as a way to denounce the military forces that defined the Roman empire and the empirical societies that were often in conflict in the first century.

It is believed this text was written around 70ce in the first century during the first of the Jewish-Roman wars. The text was written to a people who were living in the middle of a war as the Jewish community sought freedom and liberation from Roman occupation. It was this first Jewish-Roman war that that led to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which would have been destroyed about the same

time this letter was written. The war imagery, the soldier's dress, would have been an easy visual to comprehend for the early Christian church.

When the apostle speaks of the breastplate and helmet, the sword and shield, the community to whom he was speaking would surely have envisioned the Roman soldier who was dressed for combat. Perhaps if the apostle were writing a similar statement to our community today, envisioning a modern soldier as the basis for this armor of God, the apostle would have invited us to consider the rucksack of righteousness, the gortex jacket of truth, or perhaps the Kevlar helmet of salvation.

Because of the visual of the modern-day-equivalent of the soldier's gear, thinking of our preparation as an invitation to battle is an understandable leap in thinking. But, as we begin to read the text, that invitation to take a militaristic approach to faith begins to break down.

As the apostle begins this invitation, we first read, "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God."

Up front, in this opening statement, the apostle makes clear that what we're being invited to do will have little to do with our individual strength or capacity. We're hearing an invitation that mimics the stories of the Hebrew Bible, as God empowered the rise and fall of the people Israel. There's a precedence in the faith for claiming God's strength and power as we prepare for battle.

Only, the people to whom the apostle is writing in this letter were not Jewish converts to Christianity. The directed audience, being Gentiles, were likely unaware of the stories of the Hebrew Scripture, because they had not studied the Jewish texts. For them, this invitation would have come across quite differently. An invitation to be strong in the Lord, to put on the armor of God, sounds foolish to those who are very aware of the physical chainmail, swords, and legion that defines the Roman army. How might we prepare for a physical battle with a non-physical coat of armor?

As we ponder this question, we must remember, the apostle's invitation is not separate from the rest of the text in Ephesians. This invitation comes at the conclusion of the past five chapters. The apostle has made clear the promises of God in Jesus Christ. The apostle has defined the reality of our existence as a unified people living in the framework of peace because of what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Therefore, in a closing statement built upon these promises, the apostle makes clear, you don't need to be able to do anything further than what God has already done. So dress yourself in the armor God, prepare yourself to take on the strength of the Lord. For the Lord has already done great things for us, and we need not think we have to fight this battle for ourselves – the Lord has already fought and won the battle.

And yet, the invitation remains to prepare ourselves. See, even though the battle has been won, the devil is still seeking to corrupt the work of God – to convince the people of God of another way – to undo what God has already done.

To make this clear, the apostle continues, "put on the whole armor of God, so that you may stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the

rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

I find two important pieces of this text for us as we don the armor of God. First, in verse 11, we find the opening invitation is to “*stand* against the wiles of the devil.” **To stand.** I named earlier that this is not an invitation to enact war. In fact, the invitation of the apostle is more akin to the teachings of martial arts than of any empirical military. The invitation is not to wage war, not to engage in battle, not to go on an offensive in the name of God. The invitation of the apostle is to put on the armor of God so that we might be able to defend ourselves if and when the devil comes at us.

To be clear, **to stand** is not a passive word, it is very much an act of engagement. But we need not be on the offensive against the wiles of the devil, because, as we’ve already named, God has already defeated evil. Through the love of God as witnessed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can claim with all authority and assurance that love wins out over hate, that justice wins out over injustice, and that peace wins out over devastation. We do not need to try to defeat the devil in an act of aggression, for that win has already been secured. However, the devil will never be satisfied playing second fiddle to God, so we do need to be prepared to maintain – to uphold – to defend – and to stand our ground as those victorious because of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

But second, we need to know against whom we are standing our ground. If we focus on the third and fourth entities – cosmic powers and spiritual forces – we may see the invitation to be simply philosophical or spiritual. But we should not skip the first two entities named in this text, rulers and authorities, who are very much tangible and real enemies named by the apostle. The text is not determined that all rulers and authorities must be enemies, but again consider the context of the text. The apostle is writing during the height of the Roman empire’s power. There was not a ruler or authority who lorded over the region who knew, exemplified, or sought to maintain God’s rule of love and peace. And because they weren’t actively pursuing to uphold the work of God in the world, they were very much on the aggressive side against God’s love which, as this text invites, we are called to defend.

Yet, even though the rulers and authorities are real and tangible individuals, the apostle invites us to understand we are not fighting against flesh and blood. We are not seeking to tear down, injure, or cause personal harm to any individual. We are standing ground against the underlying root issues, which are so often espoused by rulers and authorities, root issues that are steeped in colonialism, power, hatred, and views of nationalistic supremacy. The same powers that drive the work of evil in the real and the cosmic realm.

Professor Richard Carlson offers, “Whether one regards evil as malevolent cosmic forces or systemic powers of racism, nationalism, and classism, the public witness of the community of faith makes it a target for attack.”ⁱ If we are doing as the apostle invites, if we are standing up against such evil to claim on behalf of God the promise of God’s love in Jesus Christ that unites humanity and proclaims peace as final, we are likely to be on the receiving end of the hatred, the bitterness, and the attack of the forces, cosmic and real, who seek to overturn the promise of God for all of creation.

And because we are likely to receive such aggression from those who prefer personal power over God's power, personal glory over the glory of Jesus Christ, and individual wealth over the well-being of all in society, we must don the armor of God and be prepared to stand firm in the promise of God in Jesus Christ. The apostle then names the pieces of armor we are to wear:

The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes so as to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

You'll notice again these items are not designed to engage in an offensive attack. These are protective pieces of gear – helmet, breastplate, shield, and the belt to hold it all together. Of the entire list, the sword is the only item that could be used in an aggressive attack. But, as the sword is listed as representative for the Word of God, we should consider how the Word of God is used by Jesus in the gospel text. Jesus always uses the word, the Bible, to defend the truth of God. Like when Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and the devil attempted to sway Jesus to take power for himself, Jesus quoted the Hebrew Scriptures to deny the devil and defend God's promise. When the woman was to be stoned, Jesus quoted the Hebrew Scriptures to defend the woman's life. When the Pharisees sought to entrap Jesus in numerous situations, Jesus quoted the Biblical word to defend his actions as upholding the truth of God. The sword is not to attack, but to defend, to stand ground, to declare the truth of God's love and will for humanity when others would skew God's word for personal gain and individual or empirical glory.

"The equipment to be utilized are not instruments of destruction but the gear which builds up the community and equips the saints for ministry."ⁱⁱ As authors Allen Verhey and Joseph Harvard note, "Compared to the armor of the Zealots and the Roman soldiers, this list of items - truthfulness and righteousness and the proclamation of the gospel of peace, faithfulness and the gifts of salvation and the word - is deeply countercultural." The apostle is using what the Gentiles believed to be the most powerful of forces – the empirical armies – and is inviting a complete reversal of the military posture as that which may best defend the promise of God in Jesus Christ, which has created a new humanity in which the most polar opposites, Jew and Gentile, might be claimed as family, united in peace, and empowered for the work of God in the world.

One final thought and then I'm through: one of my favorite movies is Braveheart. The compassion and heart that drives the Scottish to defend their liberty offers quite the story. If you've seen the movie, you can imagine the scene where William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, rides his horse in front of the Scottish army, his face is painted white and blue as he shouts out his invitation to battle. You'll remember the scene by the conclusion, where William Wallace invites the army to fight, for while they may give up their lives, they will never give up their freedom. It's an amazing moment in film.

This conclusion of the apostle is not too dissimilar from the battle field invitation of William Wallace. The apostle is inviting the community of faith, these Gentile Christians, to put on the armor of God and to be ready to defend the promise of God as witnessed in Jesus Christ. All that has been said up to this point, the promise of God's love, the declaration of our unity, the assurance of our giftedness, the assertion of who we are as God's adopted children in the family of Christ – and the imperatives that define our existence as the Church in the affirmation of these promises – they are all part of preparing

us, of equipping us, of guiding us to claim the strength of the Lord, to hold fast to the truth of God, to live in to the righteousness of Christ, and to stand firm in our faith that we may take part in the work of God in the world.

See worship isn't simply a time to get away to give praise to God, it's a time of preparation that we may go forth to live every moment of every day firmly planted in the promise of whom God has created us to be. Worship is a time of preparation, a time in which we are geared up to stand on the promises of Christ our Savior. Worship is a time of preparation, that you and I may declare the love of God for all of humanity even in the face of surmounting evil. Worship is a time of preparation, that you and I might be emboldened by the strength of God to stand up to rulers and authorities, and to declare the love of God and the peace of Christ as definitive for all creation. So may we receive the armor of God, that we, as individuals and as the collective body of Christ, may be prepared to stand firm and to declare the love of God for everyone.

Prepare us, O Lord, that we might be filled with your strength, that we might wear your armor, as participants in the holy work of sharing your love for all, that all might know your love and find new life. Amen.

ⁱ Richard Carlson. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved August 17, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.