

**“Be Strong!”**

William Shakespeare put these words into the mouth of “Julius Caesar”:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men.  
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life,  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

There are moments in life, as Shakespeare knew, when everything hangs in the balance: Caesar crossed the Rubicon and Italy went from Republic to Empire. Such extraordinary times may not come often, but they do occur with persistence and insistence. Franklin Delano Roosevelt identified December 7, 1941, as “a day that will live in infamy.” October 29, 1929, lingers in history books as “Black Friday.” And most recently, September 11, 2001, stopped life in its tracks and demanded worldwide response. So, too, today’s readings from Ephesians and John ... each are a turning point, a watershed ... a step beyond the point of no return. Paul posited the choices of faith as the prelude for battle in a winner-take-all-contest. And when John tells us of Jesus’ strident call to decision, the crowds slink away until the few left by Jesus’ side seemed powerless. The tide has turned in Jesus’ ministry at the end of John 6.

C. S. Lewis, through many of his writings, reminds us that we are not born into this world fully formed moral or religious creatures. Instead, choice by choice, opting for the right or the left, choosing the good or the gray, taking a well-traveled high-way or negotiating the path through the wilderness, we become “heavenly creatures or more hellish demons.” Today’s readings are a trumpet sounded, or as Billy Graham notes, is the “Hour of Decision.”

I want to focus primarily on the Ephesians text. Writing from house arrest in Rome, living under the watchful care of Romans soldiers, and perhaps even chained to one, Paul is impressed by their battle gear. The Epistle to the Ephesians is but one circular letter to the churches of the Lycus River valley of Asia Minor. Paul’s epistle to the church at Ephesus reflects on many things related to power and battle scenes. In chapter one, there is an unseen conflict of spiritual forces that are already won by Jesus. In chapter two, there is an ongoing tension between Jew and Gentile that can only be resolved through capitulation to Jesus’ way of thinking. In chapter three, there is a wrestling for authority in the church that requires both Paul’s assertion of his apostolic calling and a reminder of common submission to Jesus Christ. In chapters four and five, there is a cosmic combat between the world of the day and light, and the disfigured country of the night and darkness ... and it plays out in human social relations.

The final chapter, chapter 6, concludes with a stirring rallying cry, urging these early believers to “be strong in the Lord” (6:10), which is no small accomplishment considering the church’s main leader, Paul, is “in chains” (6:20). How is it possible for these early, struggling believers to “persevere” in their faith? How, indeed, are we to remain strong in our faith when the onslaught of this world’s evil forces play games with our mind, tear at our heart, and rip out our soul! Paul makes it clear with his metaphor “armor of God” that this life, at times, is a battle ground for our physical health, mental sanity and spiritual welfare. As people of faith, we ought not fool ourselves ... we are always on the turning point, always living in the circle of decision, always making a choice at a crossroads where important ways are blocked by spiritual adversaries.

One example of this that comes to my mind is from a sermon by Jim Wallis, an evangelical and editor of *Sojourners* magazine. Wallis said that when the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s Cathedral. The walls of the church were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close the service down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system, and how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: “You may be powerful --- very powerful --- but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.” Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.” While the crowd roared, the police melted away and in the exuberance of the spiritually significant moment, the people began to dance.

This is the character of Paul’s instruction in our lesson. The character of the Christian believer is not like the clandestine conniving of terrorist subversives, but rather the true believers, the followers of Jesus, are the confident

standing firm in their faith, unwilling to give ground to any who pretend to take it through bully force. Paul says, “Don’t fear ... put on the armor of God and dance ... join the winning side.”

One of the dangers when reading this passage is to become mesmerized with the various pieces of armor. But, actually, the very first verse of the lesson, verse ten, is the key: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his strength.” We can relate many of the Psalmist’s word to this verse. For example: “Happy are those whose strength is in You, O God ... They go from strength to strength.” The word “strength” comes from the Latin, meaning, “to twist together or bind tightly.” Like a cord or rope, the more threads or strands woven together, the stronger the bound whole. Paul advises the Ephesians to not only bind themselves together, but also to bind themselves to the Lord, to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” (v 10). We find our strength as believers when we are bound together with the Lord. When our lives become intertwined with God we are made stronger. Again the Psalmist: “The Lord is the strength of my life” (Ps. 27:1).

Then, we are to “put on the whole armor of God, so that (we) may be able to stand” strong. Though the image is one of a Roman soldier’s uniform, Paul is actually speaking of a spiritual armor to fight a spiritual battle. And we must be clear ... it is God’s armor ... God gives or provides it. We couldn’t put it on without God’s consent; but the divine offer is ineffective unless we accept it. Also, we must be clear that the “armor of God” is for defensive purposes, not offensive. The clothing is for defensive, resistance, rather than launching an attack. In fact, the metaphor of clothing appears elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 13 Paul speaks not only of putting on “the armor of light” (Rom 13:12) but also urges his readers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13:14). The believers’ spiritual clothing is not a superficial covering; it is an expression of who we are and who we want to be.

Our strength of armor assists us in resisting all that would lead us away from God and forfeit His blessings. Our arsenal consists of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, and the word of God. Bind all these together into your character and you have the strength of God and a protective armor to shield you. Life is a battle ... temptations abound ... comprise and complicity rule the day ... peer pressure is a real chink in the armor ... but we have the resources to withstand and prevail. We have to put them on, that is, incorporate integrity into our lives in every situation so that it becomes second nature to always choose the honest way; that is our greatest protection against the problems and consequences that come with dishonesty and cheating. Put on truth, that is, not only always tell the truth but also seek the truth in every situation --- that’s real protection against the consequences of lying and false living.

One of the main problems in organ transplants is that the organism protects itself against foreign matter, even if it is a new heart that would keep it alive. The protoplasm itself harbors its own, nurtures itself against the world, against invasions of its integrity. This protectiveness has a good side, too, of course, in that the body wards off harmful invasions of foreign matter. This is the protective armor of the human body and keeps us healthy, by and large. So, too, our moral soul has a protective armor ... a strength to ward off the onslaughts of this world’s evil forces ... this is why it is important to put on the whole armor of God ... put on the new nature of Christ ... why the expression of faith goes beyond doctrine and dogma and is actually you the person ... you the believer both inside and out.

Finally, Paul comes to the greatest weapon of all --- that is prayer. I note three things that Paul says about prayer. One, prayer must be constant. Our tendency is so often to pray only in the great crises of life; but it is from daily prayer that we will find daily strength. Two, prayer must be intense. Limp prayer never gets you anywhere. Prayer demands the concentration of every faculty upon God. And three, prayer must be unselfish. There is an ancient saying, “Let a person unite themselves with the community in their prayers.” I think that often our prayers are too much for ourselves and too little for others. We must learn to pray as much for others and with others as for ourselves.

As Christians, we are those who have “put on Christ.” We have dressed ourselves for combat with the world, taking upon ourselves “the whole armor of God.” In our struggles to live out our faith, in our attempts to resist the wiles of the evil one, and to be true to the gospel, we are not left to our own devices. We are given protection and strength through the gifts of God in Christ. Disciples ... don’t go out from this place poorly dressed. If you want to play football, put on a helmet. If you are going to be any good at soccer, get the right shoes and wear shin guards. If you are going to be a disciple, put on faith, dress up in love, clothe yourselves with good intentions and wrap the promises of God around you. Read the Bible, even if you don’t understand all of it. Pray, even when you don’t feel like it. Confess the faith in the creed, even when you don’t always 100% believe it. Then, having dressed well for the challenge ahead, go out there and live it. Put on the whole armor of God and you will become that which you profess. You will be that which you desire. Amen.