

**TO THE SAINTS IN WALLACE
GRANT US WISDOM, GRANT US COURAGE**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One day, shortly after Hurricane Floyd ravaged our community in September 1999, I was at Food Lion. I happened to meet Virginia Troy, Ann Carter’s mother, in the meat department. We talked about the damage and destruction from that 500-year storm and the overwhelming challenges our friends and neighbors and fellow citizens were facing. Just before she turned to walk away, Virginia looked me in the eye and said, “Lord, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days.”

Virginia’s words — her prayer, if you will — are certainly timely and much needed twenty-two years later. As the COVID-19 virus and its variants continue to wreak havoc on our lives, we also face daily reports of natural disasters in our country and world-wide, continued ethnic strife and wars, political divisions that are ripping us apart as a country . . . and the list seems to grow longer and longer all the time. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “What then are we to say about these things?” (Romans 8:31a)

Well, it’s as if Paul answers his own question here in his concluding exhortation to the saints in Ephesus (and Wallace) who are faithful in Christ Jesus. He writes, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” (Ephesians 6:10) Notice that Paul doesn’t say (and **never** says), “Be strong on your own. Good luck!” On the contrary, to the Romans Paul answered his question with another question that happens to be a word of assurance, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31b)

To the Ephesians (and us), Paul gives this advice (after calling us to be strong **in the Lord**), “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” (Ephesians 6:11, 13) Again, notice that the “whole armor” is “of God,” and not of our own making (more about that later!).

Take a look at the picture on the screen and it will be pretty obvious where Paul got his inspiration for his image of the “whole armor of God.”



Since Paul tells us he was a prisoner in chains when he wrote Ephesians (and on several other occasions), he certainly would have been familiar with Romans soldiers and their whole armor. By the same token, the readers and hearers of his letters would have been used to seeing the occupying Roman soldiers decked out in their whole armor.

It's not particularly helpful to spend time trying to figure out the meaning of each piece of the whole armor of God. Let me be more specific:

I don't know that there is any particular significance to the belt being truth, the breastplate standing for righteousness, etc., etc. Instead, Paul paints us an overall picture of God's protection AND God's gifts for the "facing of this hour" and "the living of these days." And Paul uses a striking image — "the whole armor of God" — to reinforce his exhortation to us to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." That sounds like how the psalmists describe God's strength and protection: "The Lord is my strength and shield . . . I love you, O Lord, my strength . . . my rock . . . my fortress . . . my shield, and the horn of my salvation." (Psalm 28:7; Psalm 18:1-2)

In John Bunyan's religious allegory of 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the main character, Christian, visits the House Beautiful where he spends a few days resting up. When it is time for Christian to resume his pilgrimage, his hosts tell him they have something to show him. Here's how Bunyan describes it:

"Now he thought of setting off, and they were willing that he should; but first, they said, let us go again into the armoury: so they did. And when he came there, they harnessed him from head to foot with armor that had been proven, lest perhaps he should meet with assaults in the way. He, being therefore thus equipped, walked out with his friends to the gate . . ."

And it's a good thing Christian had visited "the armoury" for he soon has to enter into the Valley of Humiliation, and the story continues:

"But now, in this Valley of Humiliation, poor Christian was hard put to it; for he had gone but a little way, before he noticed a foul fiend coming over the field to meet with him; his name was Apollyon. Then Christian began to be afraid, and to toss in his mind whether to go back or to stand his ground. But he considered again, that he had no armour for his back, and therefore thought that to turn his back to him might give him a greater advantage, so that he could pierce him with ease with his darts; therefore he resolved to be bold, and stand his ground. For, he thought, had I no more in my sights than the saving of my life, it would be the best way to stand."¹

What an interesting and inspiring commentary on Paul's words to believers in all times and places and circumstances: "He had no armor for his back . . . therefore he resolved to be bold, and stand his ground." That's exactly what Paul encourages us to do as believers who are called to live a life worthy of the calling to which we are called. Listen again: "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able

to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm . . . Stand therefore . . .” (Ephesians 6:11, 13, 14)

Several people have pointed out — and I think this is most important — that the “whole armor of God” that Paul describes is defensive. It is meant to help believers “stand fast, stand firm” in the faith which, as Christian determines, is “the best way to stand.” As one commentator brings to our attention, “[Paul] appropriates the common parts of armor — belt, breastplate, shield — but he assigns them uncommon values: truth, righteousness, faith. Consequently, the armor, usually a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a symbol of utter dependence on God.”²

We will close our worship today by singing the great hymn of the church, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” by Martin Luther. Interestingly, although this hymn came to be known as the battle hymn of the Protestant Reformation, Luther seems to have written it as a “song of comfort” or at least assurance for Christians facing life’s challenges. Luther certainly had to deal with turbulent, stressful, and dangerous times, including being excommunicated from his church due to his theological teachings, having a price put on his head and having to hide out in a castle, and being a pastor during the bubonic plague of 1527 that ravaged his country and village.

You may very well know the lyrics by heart, but it is worth hearing them in light of Paul’s call to stand firm in the faith. Even though Luther based his hymn on Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” you’ll probably hear echoes of “the whole armor of God” in his words — “the armor, usually a symbol of self-reliance, transformed into a symbol of utter dependence on God.”

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.
Our helper he, amid the flood, or mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he.
Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.*

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath will, his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.*

During World War II, C.S. Lewis, the British writer and lay theologian, wrote his Christian classic, *The Screwtape Letters*. The book is a collection of letters from Screwtape, one of the Devil's senior minions, to his nephew, Wormwood, a new recruit. Uncle Screwtape gives advice to Wormwood about how best to undermine a believer's faith, through mundane and subtle attacks rather than full-frontal assaults. In the introduction to his book, Lewis cites Martin Luther, who said, "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."

That's what Lewis does in *The Screwtape Letters*, but what he writes about is no laughing matter. Also in his introduction, Lewis writes, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors . . ."

No matter how you interpret Paul's description of our struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," all you have to do is watch the evening news or read the papers or check the daily news headlines online to be confronted with the overwhelming challenges of life, especially as we draw near to the end of a second year of living through a deadly pandemic. At times, you may feel the same as I do — helpless, swamped, insignificant, afraid, uncertain, unequipped to meet the challenges.

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. . . which is why we need to hear Paul's final exhortation and encouragement, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power . . . put on God's truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and Word . . . and stand firm!"

After serving as a military chaplain in World War I, Harry Emerson Fosdick was pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York City. He then accepted a call from Park Avenue Baptist Church, which was renamed Riverside Church. In 1930, in the depths of the Great Depression and halfway between two world wars, Fosdick wrote the hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory." The hymn was first sung as the processional hymn at the opening service of the newly built Riverside Church in October 1930 and again at the dedication service in February 1931. As one history of the hymn notes, "The language of the hymn is ultimately that of petition. 'Grant us wisdom, grant us courage' concludes each stanza with the effect of a refrain. The final stanza, equally prophetic, begins with 'Save us from weak resignation/to the evils we deplore.'"³

On that September day in the Food Lion meat department, I doubt Virginia Troy knew I would still be quoting her twenty-two years later, but her witness is still power-

ful and much needed today. For today we certainly need to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power and to put on the whole armor of God — truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God — so we can be bold and stand our ground, for that is the best way to stand.

And, all the while, we can pray in the Spirit in every prayer and supplication, “Lord, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days.”

Let us pray: O God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage. Give us discernment and the will to be faithful. O God, give us the power to love — all for the living of these days. Amen.

NOTES

¹John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Part I: The Forth Stage.

²David Cameron, “Gleanings from the Text: Ephesians 6:10-20,” August 23, 2009 at www.jointhefeast.blogspot.com.

³C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,’” at www.umcdiscipleship.org.