

November 27 Lesson 13 (NIV)

God Gives Tools for Our Protection

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91

Background Scripture: Acts 19; Ephesians 6:10–24; Revelation 2:1–7

Ephesians 6:10–18

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Key Text

Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

—Ephesians 6:13

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 3: We Are God's Artwork

Lessons 10–13

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How to Say It

Judaism/*oo-duh-izz-um* or *oo-day-izz-um*.

Pax Romana (Latin)*Pahks Ro-mah-nah*.

scutum (Latin)*skyoo-tuhm*.

Sheol*She-ol*.

Introduction

A. All the Toys

Though we probably hope to have a car that is reliable and safe, we are drawn to the extra features that the manufacturers build in to keep us buying their products. New styles, new colors, new electronics ... these options get us into the showroom and thinking about a new or new-to-me automobile.

People who sell cars have their own term for those options: toys. A car with lots of optional features is, to the sales force, a car with “all the toys.” And such a car is usually the first car you see when you enter the dealership.

There is little about the Christian faith that is like shopping for a car. But our text today does have a list of equipment. Unlike a car’s optional features, though, these are not toys but standard tools, the means God supplies for a victorious life in Christ. The Lord gives these to every follower of Jesus at no cost and with no exceptions.

B. Lesson Context

Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians when he was especially conscious of the stakes in the battle between good and evil. Most of his letters addressed specific issues within a congregation. Ephesians is unique, however, in presenting the gospel more generally, without taking on any

specific problems this church faced. This may be due in part to Paul's intention that this letter begin circulating from Ephesus into the wider territory, what is now Turkey.

Having planted churches across the Roman world over the course of more than two decades, the apostle had been arrested in Jerusalem during a riot (Acts 21:26–35). A corrupt governor refused to resolve his case (24:27); so after sitting in jail for two years, Paul appealed to Caesar. This appeal resulted in a trip to Rome to stand trial (25:1–12).

Paul then spent two years under house arrest in Rome, waiting for a hearing before the emperor (Acts 28:30). During this time (about AD 61–63) Paul wrote letters to his churches in cities back east, including the one in Ephesus. Doubtless the circumstances of his arrest and the daily frustrations of his imprisonment led Paul to greater awareness of Satan's schemes and the preparation necessary for defeating them.

I. Empowered by God (Ephesians 6:10–12)

A. Divine Protection (vv. 10–11)

10. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

The last two chapters of the book of Ephesians focus on ways that true faith in Christ expresses itself in daily living. This includes pursuing unity among believers (Ephesians 4:3–4), speaking truthfully and dealing with people honestly (4:25, 28), extending forgiveness (4:32), avoiding sexual sin (5:3), being a good spouse and parent (5:22–33; 6:4), and demonstrating a strong work ethic (6:5–9). These imperatives are not always easy to carry out, so Paul reminded the reader of the true source of power to be able to do so: *the Lord*.

It may seem impossible to remain consistently faithful to Christ in every (or even any) area of life. From a human perspective, this is indeed the case. Left to our own devices, we cannot become the people God has called us to be. But God has not left us to our own devices. In commanding us to live rightly, he also provides us with the resources to do so. *His mighty power* is available to us in the battle against evil.

11. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Paul's illustration has prophetic precedent: Isaiah said that "righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist" (Isaiah 11:5)—referring to the Messiah, who is of course Jesus (see 59:17). His treatment emphasizes the thoroughness with which *God* has equipped his people for spiritual protection. In full equipment for battle, a Roman soldier was an imposing figure. Legions of these soldiers were a common sight throughout the Roman Empire. Even more than any earthly leader, God does not leave us defenseless or send us into situations where we are unequipped for success.

Paul did not describe Christians' duty as conquering territory or taking prisoners, though these have been the objectives of many an earthly military, especially Rome. The enemy we face is not other human beings but Satan, the spiritual accuser and adversary who tempts and torments humanity (2 Corinthians 2:11; 1 Peter 5:8; etc.). Only by relying on God can we *stand against the devil's schemes*. The false ideas that might move us from steadfast faith have their

origins not in humans but with the spiritual being who inspires those ideas. The main question is whether we will avail ourselves of what God provides.

B. Unseen Enemies (v. 12)

12. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Judaism and other ancient religions taught that good *and* evil spirits all live in the heavens above the physical world, with human beings living in the bottom layer of a massive cosmic hierarchy. (Sheol—the place of the dead—was thought of as below the earth [example: Ezekiel 32:27].) Elsewhere, Paul describes a visionary experience of his own as a trip to “the third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2), the place where God himself dwells beyond the sky (the first heaven) and the stars (the second heaven).

A similar outlook is reflected in the verse before us, which envisions Satan and other evil spirits living skyward (*in the heavenly realms*), between the earth and God’s abode. From the vantage point we’re picturing, demons can descend to move quickly among humans to threaten and tempt us in various ways (Job 1:7). As “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Ephesians 2:2; compare John 14:30), Satan’s influence extends from certain high places to the world in which we live.

As a result *flesh and blood* people, including some who have influence over our lives and livelihoods, can serve as tools of Satan to bring the powers of darkness to bear in concrete ways. But they are not our true adversaries. Such people are not always even aware that their actions are serving the devil’s purposes, and many do not even believe in Satan at all. This does not change the fact that their actions can present serious challenges to us as believers, challenges that we must be prepared to face. These challenges can take the form of outright threats, persecution, ridicule, and rejection, but also (and more often) of more indirect temptations to join in their sin.

Even so, people are never the real enemy. Every person—no matter how their lives have been twisted by sin—was created in the image of God. These image-bearers of the Father are victims of the real enemy: Satan, along with the *rulers and authorities and powers* that willingly follow his lead. Against these *spiritual forces* is our struggle.

II. Outfitted by God (Ephesians 6:13–18)

A. Fully Equipped (vv. 13–17)

13. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

This statement expands on what Paul already said (see Ephesians 6:11, above), thus emphasizing its importance. Because we cannot predict when, where, or how the enemy will strike, we must be dressed and ready for conflict at any moment. The goal of such preparation is repeated in the phrases *you may be able to stand your ground* and *after you have done*

everything, to stand. No matter what comes our way, we must be prepared to stand against every challenge. The ground on which we stand firm is our faith in the Lord and faithfulness to a godly lifestyle.

The armor that God provides—“the armor of light” (Romans 13:12)—will protect us *when the day of evil comes* from assaults on our beliefs and from temptations to sin. This is an end-times term that anticipates a time when evil forces mount a terrible assault on God’s people just before God vanquishes them entirely, ushering in the fullness of his promised reign.

With Christ’s death and resurrection, the promises of God are being fulfilled. God’s kingdom is breaking into the world, and so we can appropriately say that the end times have begun (note the phrase “in these last days” in Hebrews 1:2). This means that Paul’s first-century audience was already facing the evil day; we still face it today. We do not put on the armor of God out of paranoia but to stand firm against the very real forces that already assail us.

14a. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist,

The word *truth* emphasizes both the content of our faith (the propositions of the true gospel message) and the way we live out that faith (our lifestyle). God has provided his people with the foundational gift of truth, a right understanding of reality (John 14:6; 2 Timothy 3:16; etc.). The gospel shows us our true selves: rebels against God in desperate need of his mercy. And it shows us that mercy is ours through faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. Truth is our defense against Satan’s lies (compare John 8:44). By thinking and living in ways consistent with God’s truth, we prepare ourselves for periods of trial that would take us along false paths.

14b. with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

Roman armor included a *breastplate*, a large leather or metal covering that protected the torso from frontal assault. Paul connected this piece of equipment with *righteousness* (compare Isaiah 59:17), the quality of living correctly in God’s eyes. We protect ourselves from Satan’s assaults by living rightly with the help of the Spirit. Being in the habit of living in the Spirit and growing in righteousness forms our character. In turn, that character serves as a defense against temptations of any kind.

15. and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

Travel of any kind instantly becomes more treacherous without the proper footwear. We note that the spiritual footwear of which Paul speaks is not *the gospel of peace* itself, but *the readiness* of that gospel. The meaning of this phrase as structured in the original language is not easy to interpret. The gospel itself that prepares our feet for the day of spiritual battle (compare Psalm 37:31; Romans 16:20).

The Roman Empire claimed that it brought peace to all its subjects, referred to as the Pax Romana. But this peace was oftentimes merely a cessation of hostility with the possibility of violence never far off. The good news of Jesus’ reign is that he brings perfect and lasting peace. Strife is replaced with goodwill among the subjects of the kingdom, wholeness of life for all who live under Christ’s rule. But most of all, it’s peace with God.

16. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

This verse evokes images from ancient warfare to describe our conflict with Satan. *The shield* to which Paul referred was the large, semicylindrical *scutum* (Latin for “shield”) of the frontline Roman soldier. These shields were locked together by soldiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, which formed a protective wall of wood and leather.

Paul’s application of this imagery makes two key points. First, *faith* is our protective shield. Faith is more than mere agreement to a creed or a statement about who Jesus is. It’s more than how we were raised. It is the trusting commitment of our lives to the truth of that statement, placing our lives in God’s all-mighty hands to provide, protect, and direct. Obedient faith shields us from temptations and difficulties, symbolized as *the flaming arrows* of Satan. Second, the typical Roman use of the *scutum* reminded Paul’s readers that there is strength in numbers. As God’s faithful people stand together, we become better able to protect ourselves.

17a. Take the helmet of salvation

Salvation in our thinking is sometimes reduced to the assurance of life after death. But salvation is not just future, but present. It’s not just overcoming death, but restoration to a life of meaning, purpose, joy, and love in everyday experience. Paul also called this *helmet* “the hope of salvation” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

The helmet also proclaims our allegiance to Christ. Roman soldiers’ helmets were fashioned to declare their nationality wordlessly but vividly. So too the hope of our salvation should shine in our lives, making clear to those who have eyes to see that we are under the Lord’s command (Matthew 13:16–17).

17b. and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Paul’s audience did not have the entire collection we call the Bible. Instead they relied on Israel’s sacred Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. And they did have this letter of Paul and perhaps a few others that had been copied and shared by other churches. They had learned the story of Jesus through the testimony of Paul and others, and they remembered and repeated those stories. For them *the word of God* was primarily the oral message of how God had acted in history through Israel to bring about fulfillment in Jesus.

The sword of the Spirit is the only armament that can be used offensively as well as defensively. But we must be careful not to use biblical knowledge as a weapon against the lost and hopeless. When we remember that we are not fighting against people (see Ephesians 6:12, above), we are reminded that our knowledge and love of the Lord protects us but is not intended to harm the lost and hopeless. Following the nudges of the Spirit will guide us as we actively proclaim the gospel.

B. Faithful Prayer (v. 18)

18. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

The armament illustrations above emphasize ways that Christians are equipped for spiritual battle. Success in spiritual battle requires a unified effort. One manifestation of Christian unity is found in prayer. Believers should *pray ... on all occasions* (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Our prayers are to include *requests* for aid against spiritual dangers. The context suggests that Paul was not

thinking of prayers for personal desires, but rather of requests for endurance and assistance against trials and temptations—like a soldier would call for supplies, reinforcements, and support. We will be much more successful at resisting the powers of evil when we have the assistance of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. By praying for one another, we ask God to supply all of us with what we need to keep fighting.

Prayer *in the Spirit* does not refer to speaking in some mystical language but rather to the channel by whom we communicate with God. Paul here portrays the Holy Spirit as a sort of messenger, carrying requests from the front lines. And because we pray in the Spirit, we should find ourselves more and more often asking for God’s will to be done, not our own, as Jesus demonstrated when he prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39; compare 42, 44).

Conclusion

A. Strong in the Lord

God’s people are always under attack from the adversary. Made new in Christ, our lives are at odds with the world around us, the world that Satan steadfastly tries to align with his evil ways. We always feel the tension of living in a world battered by evil forces; we feel the pressure that the forces of evil press on us. It is easy and natural to feel weak when it seems that darkness surrounds us.

But by God’s provision we are strong. There are no flaws in his armor, no gaps in the protection it supplies. Reviewing all that God has provided, we have renewed strength to stand firm in every circumstance. Though the spiritual battle may often seem bleak, we know that God holds victory in his hand. He will choose the moment to overturn all that opposes him and his people. What seems slow to us is the patience of our Lord, giving each person time to accept the gospel and turn from the darkness of their previous lives.

So put on your armor! And remember who the real enemy is. Then, knowing your enemy, do no harm to anyone who is not your enemy—namely every creature that bears the image of God. Instead, recruit those who need God’s armor. Offer them the protection that comes from accepting the truth about Jesus. Pray for those who join you in the fight. And keep praying for all who choose to remain defenseless against the devil’s attacks.

B. Prayer

O God, you have met our every need through Christ. By our power may we stand faithfully and firmly as your people, no matter what we may encounter. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Outfitted with God’s armor, we overcome every attack of Satan.¹

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