

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Armed for the Gospel

Ephesians 6:16-20

Mark Vroegop

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak (Eph. 6:16-20, ESV).

Several years ago, I heard Mark Dever say, “Young pastors tend to overestimate what they can do in one or two years and underestimate what they can do in ten.” I’ve found that to be true, but not just with young pastors. I’ve found that to be true with all pastors, including myself. However, when Mark Dever made this statement, he was talking to pastors. That’s important because as I’ve grown older, I’ve come to believe that truth applies not just to pastors; it applies to every Christian, both young and old.

I think it’s fair and reasonable to adjust the definition to say this: Christians tend to overestimate what they can do in one to two years and underestimate what they can do in ten. If you are a Christian, do you sense this to be true in your life? I sure do. And it’s certainly not getting any better.

The pace of our culture is creating higher expectations for the speed of change. We are not becoming more patient. And we tend to look for “mountain-top” experiences to make everything better—that epic vacation, job promotion, fulfilling relationship, or ground-breaking therapy session. We’re always looking for the “upgrade.” Or we want a quick fix. We’ve become so accustomed to quick service, searching the Internet for an answer, or the customization of our lives, that it’s affecting how we live every day.

But it’s also affecting how Christians think about their spiritual lives. We tend to overestimate what can happen in one to two years and underestimate what can happen in ten.

Spiritual growth and change are slow. In fact, I’m increasingly nervous when I hear about someone who makes a big change and then goes super public with it. I love a great story about life change, but it’s good to be reminded that sanctification is a long-term project. It takes faithfulness, consistency, intentionality, and . . . let me add one more: vigilance.

Vigilance means to be alert and watchful with consistency. Periodic or haphazard vigilance isn’t vigilance. That’s being irresponsible or dangerous.

Do you know that **Christian identity requires vigilance**?

I don't mean that you have to maintain it. By this I mean that you have to consistently remind yourself and rehearse what is true. It's one thing to know what Christian identity is—understanding who you are in Christ, what's going on in the world, and the battle we face. But the real challenge is being vigilant.

The problem for most Christians isn't understanding Christian identity; it's living it out on a consistent basis.

Last week Pastor Mitch helped us consider how the armor of God connects to the gospel through truth, righteousness, and peace. This week we'll see four more resources from Paul as we think about how we live in and through Christian identity—to become who we are—especially as we consider the battle that we face every single day.

Four Resources

Remember that Paul is using a battle metaphor to describe the spiritual warfare taking place between the devil and Christians. Previously we've heard Paul's exhortation about the nature of the battle—not wrestling against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil. And he talked about standing firm by taking up the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and shoes with gospel readiness.

In verses 16-18, there are four more resources to consider and embrace with spiritual vigilance.

1. Shield of Faith

Notice how verse 16 begins: "In all circumstances take up the shield of faith." We'll talk about the shield in a moment, but let's not miss this statement. Paul envisions taking up the shield of faith as something that must be done always—all the time. There's never a situation in a Christian's life where he or she doesn't need to have the shield of faith. We'll see in a moment that the threat involves something described as "flaming darts."

But here's the thing: spiritual warfare and incoming fire from the enemy isn't an on-and-off-again reality. It's always happening. I don't often think about it that way. When things get really challenging, that's when I think, "I'm facing spiritual warfare." But that's terribly naïve. This text reminds us that we are always facing spiritual warfare and the flaming darts of the evil one. Vigilance involves understanding that there's a real battle always happening.

In fact, I think our failure to think about life this way puts us at risk. Flaming darts are dangerous, but forgetting about flaming darts is deadly. We need spiritual vigilance. We're to apply our Christian identity and the shield of faith "in all circumstances."

What about the shield of faith? In the Roman military, the shield was the most important defensive weapon. It was not the size of Captain America's shield. It was closer to the size of a small door, covered with leather and large enough that a soldier could hide behind it. However, this was not just for

individual protection. The shield was used in formation to protect a group of soldiers so that they could advance together. It's a protective piece of armor, but it created the opportunity to move forward.

No wonder Paul calls it the shield of faith. After all, faith is the foundation of Christian identity. We may know the truth, but it's only applied as we embrace faith in God, in what he says, and what it means. Faith means believing in what we know is true but we can't see. Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Faith is real. It's just that we can't see it.

Faith is the main protector against assaults of the enemy that come through "flaming darts." It's a powerful description since flaming arrows would have been "fast, indiscriminate, and highly lethal."¹

But when the shield of faith is taken up, the flaming arrows are barely a threat. The only time when you'd be in danger is if the shield of faith was not in the right position. Vigilance with the shield of faith and joining forces with other soldiers would create a lot of protection.

There's a lot to this verse, isn't there? And it's particularly a call for Christians to think about how actively we are living by faith, rehearsing what's true, reminding ourselves what we believe. But even more, we need to consider how to walk together for maximum protection. And in all circumstances, to take up the shield of faith.

2. Helmet of Salvation

You may have a lot of different images of this helmet. Constantine Campbell, in his commentary on Ephesians, writes the following:

The Roman helmet, normally constructed of bronze fitted over an iron skull cap lined with leather or cloth, was yet another essential piece of equipment that protected the head from blows from every direction apart from a directly frontal attack. But frontal attacks could be anticipated, while attacks from other directions may not be seen, thus the helmet's protection from other angles of attack was essential. Indeed, the Greek word for "helmet" is literally a combination of words that means "around the head."²

Like the shield of faith, it's a critical piece of protection, especially from "blindsides" attacks. By calling it the helmet of salvation, Paul does two things. First, he connects this to Isaiah 59 where the Lord is described as battling his enemies with a helmet of salvation. This is not an unusual description, and it's a reminder that not only does the battle belong to the Lord, but so does the helmet! Remember that Christian identity is understanding phrases like "in the Lord" or "the strength of his might."

¹ Constantine R. Campbell, [*The Letter to the Ephesians*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 288.

² Constantine R. Campbell, [*The Letter to the Ephesians*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 289.

Secondly, by calling it the helmet of salvation, it's a reminder that the victory has already been achieved. In this way the helmet reinforces the certainty of ultimate protection, triumph, and deliverance.

The helmet provides assurance about that nature of the battle. It counters discouragement, disillusionment, despair, or disdain. Charles Hodge (1797-1878) wrote "That which adorns and protects the Christian, which enables him to hold up his head with confidence and joy, is the fact that he is saved."³

This is a good place for me to pause in our journey through Ephesians 6 to talk about salvation. Up to this point in the sermon, I've only been addressing Christians, because that's who this armor is intended for. It's who Paul is describing here using the metaphor of spiritual armor. But this armor doesn't make sense unless you understand the key truth that it points to.

Salvation, or being saved, is how the Bible refers to the amazing grace that God applies to people who turn from their sins and put their faith in Jesus for their forgiveness. This brings salvation: the cleansing that makes a person righteous, that creates a new heart, and grants to God's people a promise of eternal life. It's a personal relationship with Jesus that changes everything about you because how you think about yourself is totally different now. It means that your future is secure and fixed. Therefore, you have a level of spiritual confidence as you face the battles of life.

In order for that to be true, you must believe in Jesus. You must turn from your sins and trust in Jesus alone for the forgiveness you need. We call on the name of Jesus in order to be saved.

You see, that's what the helmet of salvation is all about.

If you're a Christian, everything I just said is not new. But your posture toward that information is critical. On the one hand, you can have a "ho-hum" attitude: "Yep, did that already." And it can sound and feel like you're "so over" coming to Jesus. As a result, you think of the helmet of salvation in a way that's unhelpful. You can think of salvation as something in the past with little relevance to your life today. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, embracing Christian identity is more about reconnecting what you've known for a while versus looking for the new, stunning truth that you want to grip you. Darrel Bock, in his commentary, says, it's "the idea that our secure identity in an already possessed salvation means that we have no reason to be fearful."⁴

In this way, it isn't learning something new. It's about remaining committed and passionate about things you've already learned. It's about vigilance about what you already know to be true.

³ John R. W. Stott, [*God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 282.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, [*Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 205.

3. Sword of the Spirit

The third piece of armor is the sword of the Spirit. Interestingly, Paul provides even greater clarity here, probably for emphasis. He says, “which is the word of God.” So, clearly this is about the Bible, the Scriptures.

The word that Paul uses for sword points to a particular kind of battle weapon used for close combat.⁵ It would have been about two inches wide and two feet long.⁶ It was an important part of the soldier’s armor, and it was used for both defense and offense. It’s noteworthy that Paul identifies it both as “of the Spirit” and “the word of God.”

To say “of the Spirit” implies that this piece of the armor is provided by and connected to the Holy Spirit. The sword isn’t the Spirit. The sword is supplied by the Spirit. Besides connecting this to the third member of the Trinity, it’s also bringing in the notion of supernatural power. To say that it’s “the word of God” makes the image even more evident and clear. Now “word of God” could refer to the statements in the Bible like the way Jesus countered the Devil’s schemes in his temptation (Matt 4:1-11). Jesus countered the deceptive statements of the Devil with the truth of God’s word. It also could be a more general reference to the message of the gospel itself (see Eph. 1:13, 5:26).

In the same way that the helmet of salvation was connected to the king in Isaiah, so too the word of God is connected to Isaiah 11:4. The Messiah will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.” His words are the means of life, judgment, and victory. By using the Word of God, the Christian puts him- or herself in a position to use the spiritual resources of the King of Kings.

It is the Word of God that is able to dispel the enemy’s assaults and temptations. But it’s also the Bible that is able to cut through the fog of unbelief and hard-heartedness that plagues so many non-believers. As the world grows darker, the temptations seem stronger, and the resistance seems entrenched, our hope is not some new strategy or program. We must know and love and trust the Word of God.

Our second core value at College Park is “Authority of the Word.” It means that there is power in the Bible. There’s supernatural spiritual resources in the Scriptures that change lives, give life, and provide nourishment.

But here’s the thing: you have to read the Bible and listen to the Bible taught with this in mind. Otherwise, you’ll just treat it like another book or my sermon as some TED talk or podcast episode. You have to be vigilant with how you read and how you listen! This is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

⁵ Constantine R. Campbell, [*The Letter to the Ephesians*](#), ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 289.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, [*Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 205.

4. Prayer

Sometimes people miss the significance of Paul placing this here and its connection to the spiritual armor. I've described it as the air that Christian soldiers breathe. We see this through the two descriptions of prayer: "at all times" and "in the Spirit."

The explanation of "at all times" is fairly straightforward. Prayer is not merely something Christians do and participate in. It's to be their continual practice—a spiritual, heart-level conversation with the Lord. This fits well with what I suggested about the all-encompassing nature of this spiritual battle. While we may experience different levels of intensity, we must realize that this battle is always happening.

"In the Spirit" is not a special kind of prayer. Rather, Paul is connecting this phrase to the previous one about the sword of the Spirit (the Word). The Bible is God's way of communicating to us. We communicate with him through prayer.

And we are to pray this way through our prayers and supplication—a reference to more general prayer and our specific requests.

Now, I had intended to cover beyond verse 18 today, but we'll pick this up next week, along with the final series of verses in Ephesians. And I'll also share next week what our next sermon series will be. But for today, notice what follows: "To that end, keep alert with all perseverance."

We are called to spiritual vigilance. Church, there's always a battle taking place. The question is whether or not we see it, understand it, and even care about it. The way that you become who you are is to be regularly, consistently reminded of the sacred truths. Keeping alert requires regular intention, not always "highs and lows," but a consistency in our approach to the Christian life.

Christian identity requires vigilance.

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