

## **“Standing in the Armor of God” based on Ephesians 6:10-20 and Psalm 82**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 25, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

On the day before she was executed in the city of Carthage of North Africa around the year 202, Perpetua, a young woman of noble birth with a young son, prayed for a vision from God. In the vision she received, she was led to the center of an arena. She was expecting to face wild beasts, an Egyptian man came out to fight her. Before they fought, another man of marvelous stature walked out, and he wore sandals made of gold and silver. He carried a green branch with golden apples. He asked for silence and declared, “If this Egyptian defeats her, he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.” And so, the fight began.

She wrote in her diary, “My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground.” At the end of the match, she said, “He fell flat on his face, and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout, and my helpers started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: ‘Peace be with you, my daughter!’ I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke.”

Her vision recalls the Exodus with her Egyptian enemy, and the struggle of Eve with the serpent, to whom Eve gave in. It also recalls the promise that a future son of Eve would crush the serpent’s head. In the vision, she entered as a woman, remaining herself, but had the look of a man’s body.

She said, “I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory.” Soon after that, her narration ends, and another narrator picks up the story. This new narrator tells us about Felicitas, who was an enslaved woman, but in Christ, she was a sister and an equal to the noble-born Perpetua.

Felicitas was pregnant and afraid that she would not give birth in time. If she had not, she would have been kept from going into the arena with Perpetua. But she gave birth prematurely and screamed in her labor. Her baby was given to a fellow believer who raised her. There was a guard who, after seeing her go through the pains of labor asked how she expected to endure death, “Little did you think of [the beasts],’ he says, ‘When you refused to make sacrifice, [to the emperor].”

Her response sheds light on that weird detail of her change in gender in the fight with the Egyptian, because Felicitas says, “What I am suffering now, I suffer by myself. But then, another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him,” speaking of course of the Lord Jesus. And so, Perpetua and Felicitas were sent to the arena in Carthage in a celebration of Emperor Septimius Severus’s birthday.

The women were killed by a fierce heifer, a cow that recently gave birth, which the Romans chose to match their gender and status. But Perpetua, even after her ordeal with the cow and its horns (Yes, cows have horns which we cut off to prevent injuries), she reportedly asked when she would be sent to the beast. It was only then that she noticed her injuries. She had been in “the ecstasy of the Holy Spirit,” wearing armor of God in that arena. She told her fellow Christians about to be martyred, “Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and do not be offended by my sufferings.” She was then stabbed with a sword, and cried out in pain, but was still alive. It seemed, she was unable to be slain without consent, until she directed the gladiator to kill her.

This story is the earliest known text that was surely written by a Christian woman. It is a story that her contemporary, the great writer Tertullian, who gave us the term “Trinity,” surely knew, when he wrote that, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The witness of Perpetua and Felicitas led many to believe in Jesus and follow them in faith.

Beloved, we are not all called to be killed for our faith, nor should that ever be something we seek. Yet we are all called to be witnesses – this is what the word martyr means. To witness requires two things – first to see God at work in the world, and second, tell the truth of what we see and believe about God. This means we open our eyes to where God’s love is active in our own life and look for where God’s love is active around us. A martyr knows the grace and truth of Jesus, and lives or dies so others will know it too.

The story of Perpetua and Felicitas illustrates what Paul is talking about throughout Ephesians. This is the story of an educated noble woman, likely of Roman birth, in the colony of Carthage. She is with an enslaved woman, likely from the colonized people of North Africa. These two women went to their death as bravely as the men in their company. They died as equals to them. They even corrected a bishop, who was afraid of his church falling apart if they died.

For the past six weeks, we have been moving through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In week one, we saw that through Christ, we are joined with God as adopted heirs, given the downpayment of the Holy Spirit to live in and among us. In week two, we saw Paul expound the good news of peace, by which we are given new life in Christ to be a new humanity made up of all nations. We are God’s accomplishment, or handiwork, prepared for good works according to God’s purpose. In week three, Paul describes God’s household, as a mystery because all are welcomed.

Then we transitioned into how we are to live based on these realities. First, this requires us to be like Christ – humble, gentle, and patient, bearing with one another in love to be unified in the bond of peace in the Holy Spirit. Our oneness is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who he is and what he did. It’s not a uniformity God desires, but unity in Christ alone. In the fifth week, Paul says to discard anger, malice, and lies, and be changed, speaking the truth of Jesus in love.

Finally, last week, we saw Paul describe the household of God in terms of mutual submission, in which he overturned Aristotle’s concept of the slave owning father and husband, by addressing what mutual submission looks like between wives and husbands, between children and parents, and between the enslaved and the free.

Paul flips Aristotle’s writing to go against Greco-Roman culture, by saying men must treat women as their own body. Likewise, fathers must not anger children and owners must treat workers as their equals, treating them as they would Christ, and without threats.

What’s ironic, as I said last week, and which is relevant this week, is that this counter cultural text has been often pulled from its context, Where immediately before, Paul re-emphasizes the need to not be like the nations. He says not to live in darkness of the mind – which is possibly his critique of an overdeveloped reliance on philosophy. Yet, often, Paul’s words against the culture then have sadly been misused to impose Greco-Roman social hierarchies claiming that they are somehow biblical. This is done even after Paul condemns fornication, impurity, and greed, three traits tied to male Roman citizens, who were expected to use women, children, and slaves however they desired, while worshiping pagan idols, and to be ambitious and take whatever they wanted.

As I said, this relates to the armor of God, because like the household codes, this text is often ripped from its context as well. It gets misused to talk about what we wear when we conquer the world. It gets used while ignoring what Paul said in Romans, we are more than conquerors. You see, conquerors act with greed, but we are more than that because Christ loves us.

Instead, we should see the armor of God for what it is as the culmination of this whole letter as a summary of Paul's ethical commands. The second half of Ephesians is a practical application to the first half of the letter. We are to truly live as though God has brought all people into the household of God. It's hard enough to be married to one person, imagine a household with all people, all opinions and all everything united. We are all unique individuals who bring a lot to the table.

It's not easy. The armor of God can be seen for what it is: The armor is our protection in what Paul has said it takes to follow Jesus. Perpetua and Felicitas wore this armor as they gave witness to the arena of nonbelievers. They wore this armor as they challenged the wavering faith of their own church leaders. And in the dream of Perpetua and the words of Felicitas after childbirth, they recognized that they were not to wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the powers of this world order of darkness. This means we fight spiritual forces in the heavenly, meaning in the unseen spaces over us.

We live in 2024. It's hard in our modern mindset to think about spiritual forces in heavenly places. This is why Carolyn read the very strange Psalm 82, in which God talks to other "gods." God is judging the angelic beings whom God charged with watching over us, but who, instead of reflecting their creator, rebelled for their own glory. Notice the charge against these fallen angels, or false gods: They "vindicate injustice" meaning make excuses for unjust actions, and they "lift up the wicked," giving power to those who would do harm.

God commands these angels to defend those who are poor and those who are orphans, and to give justice to those who are lowly, or humble, and who are in need. God says people do not know the truth, nor do they understand what is right. They walk around in darkness – perhaps this is where Paul gets the language of darkness, to possibly refer to the philosophies of this world. The foundation of the earth is unstable – it shakes beneath them. God tells the fallen angels, I called you gods, and you were immortal children, but now they will die, executed just like humans, because they misled humans. It's a wild text.

When Paul says our wrestling is not with flesh and blood, this is what we wrestle. As humans, we join in God's battle with these principalities, powers and rulers. We can choose to see these as Paul and the Psalmist did, as actual spiritual beings, or as modern theologians do, as the empowered cultures and structural evils. Either way, Paul's point is the same – God rejects the idea of "us" versus "them" God rejects the idea of "good" people and "bad" people who must fight and instead calls us to stand for God's love, grace and truth, protected by the armor of God, to withstand evil.

Beloved, the armor of God is for our protection, not our fight. Notice the verb, the command, that Paul gives – he says put on the armor and stand. He says the armor will withstand, as we stand, and keep awake. The word devil means "divider." It means, "One who throws through." In Paul's letters he interchanges "devil" and "Satan," which means adversary. In different contexts, he uses the different terms and so it is intentional here that he uses "divider" since so much of Ephesians, is about finding unity in Christ.

Beloved, the schemes of the divider tell us that there are good people and bad people, and that the job of the good people is to defeat the bad people by any means necessary. In this, what results is that even if the “bad” people are going against the will of God, then the good people are as well. It’s a vicious spiral.

For us to proclaim the truth of God that all of humanity are co-heirs in Christ. When we turn to Christ it is not enough claim truth, but we must live that truth, living like Christ with humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, so that we find unity in the bond of peace in the Spirit. We have the Spirit as our downpayment, and it empowers us to build a community, but also, we have this armor too.

Our calling is to stand for the God’s purpose, bringing all people together in Christ. If we have the truth God’s Son who lived as we live, died, rose and ascended for us, then people will see us living as though we truly believe it. It becomes a belt around our hips holding us together as the belt of truth. When we are just, it is like a breastplate protecting us. When we have the gospel of peace, we can go anywhere we need to go, with shoes that protect our feet.

Our faith then is our shield, that will protect us from the arrows shot by the evil one. Our faith shields us from the lies that we must be divided, hierarchical and selfish. With the shield of faith, the knowledge of our salvation becomes a helmet, giving us the confidence to go headfirst into the challenges of life. Lastly, our sword is the Spirit, which guides us with God’s voice. There are two words that can be translated as “word.” One is logos, which can mean “reason,” and the other is rhema which is an utterance or voice. When we translate it as God’s word, sometimes we think it means the bible and which we can use to smack people over the head. What Paul says is the Spirit guiding us is God’s voice.

Beloved, to live the Christian, it’s hard. But you are loved by God, and you are not alone. The Holy Spirit is here, in and among us, and even though we see division in our world, God’s desire is for all humanity to be brought together in Christ. We do this, not by dragging people in and forcing them to believe, but by living ourselves like Christ by loving those who are different from us, sharing our faith, doing so more as how we live with others in addition to anything we might say.

Not all are called to be like Perpetua and Felicitas, but we can all learn from their example. In a world more violent than we live in today, they were sent to die for their beliefs. but through every indignity, every challenge, and every struggle, as they went against the Roman order of worshipping an emperor and empire. They instead lived in the humility of Christ, standing for what was right, and giving all they had – be it status, family, or their own life – to the service of proclaiming truly, who Jesus is and what he did. It’s proclaiming that Jesus, not Caesar is Lord.

This isn’t easy and we all struggle with this because the world is harsh and hard still today, Even in the bible belt South you can get funny looks when you truly try to live this Christian lifestyle. This is because even certain fellow believers take the by-any-means-necessary approach. Our fellow believers will do that. We might be inclined to do that. But if we follow the bible, and this teaching, we can live like Christ, by trusting the armor to protect us and reveal the truth and grace of God by our witness. Amen.