

August 23, 2009

Protection!

Philippians 4:4-9 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 6:10-20 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 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, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, in all circumstances take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the

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gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

For the past 5 weeks I have been preaching on scriptures from the letter to the Ephesians. Today is the last sermon in this series. And just like all teachers, as we end this unit of study, I want to recap the important points.

The first passage of Ephesians that I preached about back on July 19 told us that Christ has broken down all the barriers between us. Christ is our unity! What we have in common in Christ is far more important than the differences between us!

The next week I spoke about being rooted in God's love and how that gives us the strength to go out and serve God and others.

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Then came the sermon about the doors and the keys. Have you found the door that your key unlocks yet? Keep praying. The answer is there. Let's unlock ALL the doors to the kingdom of God!

And don't forget the power of words! We speak the truth in love, to build each other up.

And last week I spoke to you about the will of God and how God is always with us even when we don't know how to see him.

So, in the unity that Christ brings us, and rooted in the love of God, we go out to serve God and others. We learn which door is opened with our key, and together, in Christian unity, we can open ALL the doors of the Kingdom of God!

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When we run out of energy or motivation we can build each other up by speaking the truth in love, encouraging each other, calling each other on it when we're making excuses, and helping each other. And God is always with us as we struggle and have times of hopelessness and discouragement!

In a nutshell, this is the message so far of the letter to the Ephesians!

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And, honestly, maybe it was, but there is some reason why someone put these words here. Whether they were part of the original letter or not doesn't matter. They were added because someone thought they fit, that they had something important to say, both back then and to us today.

In the first century, Christians were persecuted, first by Jews, who considered them heretics, then by the Romans who required people to call the emperor "Lord" and make sacrifices to the Roman gods.

Persecution by the government was not widespread in the early 60s, when this letter was written, but Nero was beginning to go on the offensive. By the year 64 he blamed the Christians for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome.

So this last section of this letter may have been a response to the danger that Christians were in. It was a metaphor based on everyday images, just like many of the stories that are in the New Testament.

People in the Roman empire were very familiar with the appearance of the soldiers----the helmet, the breastplate, the shield, the whole outfit. So to describe the way that God protected them in those terms was a good way to explain what he was talking about. Not only that, but every time they saw a Roman soldier, they would be reminded of his words.

He wrote, **“Put on the whole armor of God, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes for your feet to proclaim the peace of God. Take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit”** and the people had a very clear picture in their minds.

Each one of these articles stood for a gift of God---truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, strength to turn away the lies of the devil, salvation, and the word of God. Each one of those gifts was something they needed to be reminded about, to keep in mind at all times.

So this image of God's armor was very powerful and empowering for the early Christians. It gave them comfort and strength, hope and faith.

Today we as Christians don't face persecution, at least not in this country, but we are surrounded by all kinds of temptation, all kinds of challenges to our faith, all kinds of lies and unrighteousness, and so much need to spread the gospel of God's peace.

We're not so much into armor these days, so what kind of metaphor, what kind of image is there that would strengthen us and empower us, that would remind us of the amazing grace and presence of God in our lives?

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What do we see every day or at least every week that could have that kind of meaning for us?

We could use a constant reminder just like the Ephesians, so what can we use?

I want to go back to the image of being rooted firmly in God's love.

With love as the root, a huge ancient tree grows strong in the power of God and as straight up as the righteousness of God, with God's justice supporting it from every side.

The trunk of salvation grows broad enough to carry the nutrients we need, that is, the word of God, grace, the power of prayer, a firm faith.

The fruit that grows on our tree of life is truth, mercy, forgiveness, gentleness, holiness. The leaves provide shelter from temptation, shading us, we could say, from the bright lights that distract us and blind us to the Gospel of Christ.

The tree is large, with a canopy that comes down and covers us, shielding us from evil and sheltering us when the storms and struggles of life hit. Kept close to the love of God, the air we breathe is the Holy Spirit moving around us, among us, through us.

The power and strength of God is there in the steadfastness and age of the huge tree. Nothing can move this tree, or bend or break it. It has been growing since before time began and will continue to grow until time is no more.

And we are safe and our every need is provided for while we are under the canopy of this God tree.

Now, I realize that this may not be as strong an image for you as putting on the armor of God. In fact, there is one huge problem with it.

The tree can't move, and neither can we without losing the protection of its shade! And if we are to share the gospel of the peace of God, we need to be able to travel!

So the image of the tree may not work.

After all, putting on armor lends itself,
in fact it pretty much insists on
being in action,
on going out and doing something,
fighting the good fight,
defending the righteous,
keeping the peace, whatever needs doing!

Sitting under a tree says “Sit still and don’t move. Just stay here
where you’re safe and comfortable.”

Our scripture from Ephesians does tell us to “stand firm.” But it also
says to take the shield of righteousness and the helmet of salvation
and the sword of the Spirit.

To tell us to “take” anything implies that we are going somewhere.
Definitely not sitting under a tree! And if we are putting on shoes to
proclaim the gospel of peace, we are definitely not going to be
sitting still!

So what can we add to our tree of God image that lets us get out from under the shade of the branches safely, so that we can travel, so that we can put on our shoes and spread the gospel of the peace of God?

What can we add that would strengthen this image, making it more relevant and useful?

Think about the shade of the tree. When we go out into the sunshine, out from that shade, what do we need to take to protect us? When we take the fruits that are truth, mercy, forgiveness, gentleness, holiness with us out to the world, how can we protect ourselves from the corruption and the temptation that are out there in the bright sunshine?

Well, what do you take when you plan to spend the day in the sun? What protects you when you're outside all day long?

Don't laugh. I'm going to suggest to you that part of this image is sunscreen. SPF 60+. And a hat.

Don't go out in the sun without your sunscreen! Put on a hat to protect yourself, too!

The sunscreen of salvation! The hat of the word of God!

My grandfather, a professional gardener, and my other grandfather, a minister, always protected themselves from the sun. Neither one ever went outside without a hat. There was no sunscreen in those days, so they wore long pants and long sleeves.

They covered themselves, just as we should cover ourselves, either with clothing or with sunscreen, when we're out in the sun.

Cover ourselves with God's love, peace, truth, grace, forgiveness, and more.

Paul says that for shoes we should put on whatever makes us ready to go out and proclaim the gospel of the peace of God.

Instead of shoes in the image that we are using, let's put on our sunscreen and our hats and go out to proclaim the gospel of the peace of God!

Literally, what does this mean? When speaking metaphorically it's important to know what the metaphor means.

So let me explain---

We need to spend time with God, who is the tree. We need to become connected and nurtured and fed with the love of God, nourished by the fruits, which are God's grace, forgiveness, truth, justice, holiness. We have to not only know about those things, we have to experience them for ourselves, to know the reality and the impact of God's actions in our own lives.

Making them a part of our selves, our souls, our hearts.
Having a very personal, active relationship with God.

That is the sunscreen we can put on.

And the hat is God's word. Not necessarily memorizing scripture, although that can be helpful, but understanding what the word of God has to say to you, knowing what it means, what difference it makes in the way you live.

Knowing God personally, being both servant and friend of Jesus Christ, that's what makes us ready to venture out from the shade of the tree, prepared to share the gospel of God's peace.

We can't share the gospel of God's peace unless we have first hand knowledge.

Our reading from Philippians tells us that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding-----

We can't understand it, but we know it when we feel it. It's a gift from God. It enters our hearts and minds when we spend time with God, with Christ.

When we abide with Christ----

That's what it comes down to. Abiding.

Just like we love to spend time with our favorite people, our best friend, family members we love so much,

We need to spend time with God.

It's hard in this busy world. We scramble to earn a living, to take care of our kids and our aging parents, to run errands and take care of our homes. There are so many demands on our time!

Somehow, we must find time for God. Because it takes time to put on the armor, it takes time to sit under the tree and eat God's fruit.

Sunday is that time, at least part of it. During the week we also need to find time.

Maybe at the beginning of the day, to start the day off right.

Maybe at the end of the day, to think about God's blessings given that day and ask for forgiveness for wrongs done and for strength for the next day.

Maybe you will find the time by yourself. Maybe you will find it with someone you love.

I can't find the time for you. It's up to you.

All I can say is that if you want the protection of the tree's canopy, if you want the protection of the armor of God, you do need to find the time.

My prayer for you is that you will do just that.

Amen.