

Empowered by the Lord

In the name of him who is our Refuge and Fortress, dear friends in Christ: the militant theme that permeates the readings, hymns, and psalm chosen for today is one that you veterans out there can probably relate to very well. I know I can, having trained for five years with the Army Reserve and then serving ten years on active duty in the Regular Army before I switched careers and became a pastor. But whether you did only nine weeks of basic training or a full twenty years, if you've been in the military service at all, for better or worse, it becomes part of you. Like they say: once a soldier, always a soldier. And so this biblical theme of preparing for war really resonates with some of us; but I'll bet even you civilians out there can understand.

My first active duty assignment was in Germany back in the early eighties—back when the Cold War was still very much going on. That's a war we don't talk about much anymore; but from the end of WWII until about fifteen years ago – some forty-five years all together – US forces were deployed in Western Europe to be part of the first line of defense against a possible (and considered then to be likely) invasion by the Soviet Union and its communist allies. It was a tense time because there was this constant threat hanging over our heads – not the least of which was the fear that if something did start and the war went from cold to hot, it wouldn't be long until things escalated into an exchange of missiles tipped with nuclear warheads. We lived at all times under a cloud of anxiety born of knowing that in minutes the world as we knew it could suddenly vanish in a maelstrom of a thousand of atomic fireballs. As someone born on the tail end of the baby boom in the late fifties, I never knew anything different. It's interesting: the youth to whom I now have the pleasure(?) of teaching confirmation were born after the Cold War was over. For them it will never be much more than a footnote in the history books. But for those of us who are a bit older, it was very *real war*—even if it was a very *different kind* of war. It was a war without shooting, without battlefields, and without casualties – at least not the kind that can be seen and counted. Mostly it was a war of *preparedness*, of matching the enemy move for move in not *fighting* but in *being ready to fight*—to fight and win – and by doing so keeping him afraid to throw the first punch. And so, what that translated into for those of us stationed in Europe was constantly having to train and drill. It meant practicing and repeating all the procedures we hoped we'd never have to use for real over and over again. It meant checking equipment, double checking it, and then rechecking it again *just to be sure*. And that's the way the Cold War was fought in Europe for forty-five years. And then one day the war ended. The once mighty and terrible Soviet Union just kind of imploded on itself. The great big shadow of threat it cast over the West vanished. And because of that some folks might be tempted to think that all that effort and expense it took to fight the Cold War was wasted. That'd be a mistake. The biggest reason the Cold War stayed cold was precisely because we were ready to fight it. Preparedness was the key to victory.

Well, times have changed. Today we're not so much worried about having to fight a war with a major superpower. Now the greatest threat to our peace and national security comes in the form of an enemy that prefers to use stealth and terrorism in place of a large standing army. His method is to remain hidden, probe for weak spots, strike quickly, and get away – or, as is often the case, to send his foot soldiers on suicide missions. He's willing to sacrifice one to kill many. It's a very different kind of war; but once again preparedness remains the best key to victory against this new enemy. We have to study his methods, anticipate his moves, and most of all to be ready and waiting for him whenever and wherever he sticks up his head. If we can't do that, we will not win.

With all that being said, in the Epistle lesson for today the Apostle Paul warns us to prepare ourselves for war – for battle against yet another foe. This is a very real enemy, a very powerful and resourceful one; and he's been waging war on mankind since the dawn of Creation. Like in the Cold War, there's no actual shooting going on. There are no battlefields that can be seen. They are inside of us: in our hearts, our minds, and our souls; that's where the war being is fought. But unlike the Cold War, this time the enemy isn't going to go away one day soon. He's persistent. And like a terrorist, he's content to lie hidden or disguised, waiting patiently for an opportune moment, any show of weakness, or timely target that may present itself. That's when he strikes. And that's why Paul warns us to get and remain ready at all times. It is said that war is hell. That, of

course, is an overstatement. Sure, war is bad; maybe it's as bad as this life can possibly get – but it's not hell. No, hell is where you end up if you lose this war, and it's worse than anything you can imagine. Our enemy wants to see us there. And I should add that there are no civilians in this conflict. If you are not a combatant, if you are not actively engaged in the fight, then you are either a prisoner or a casualty and probably both.

All the more reason for us to heed Paul's call to arms and prepare ourselves for the fight. The key to victory is preparedness. Paul calls us to keep in mind the vast forces that are arrayed against us and the terrible consequences of losing precisely so that we will be on guard and doing the ongoing training, drilling, and checking of equipment necessary to ensure that we remain strong in the Lord. And I hate to say it, since it's the theme verse for CLS this year, but "Be strong in the Lord" is a rather unfortunate translation of what actually Paul says. It makes it sound as if it is you who are to be strong in your allegiance to the Lord, in the way that you follow and obey him. That's not it. The verb Paul uses there is passive. A more accurate way to say it is "Be empowered by the Lord". The idea is not that we are to be strong; but rather that we are to let go of any trust we have in ourselves so that the Lord will be strong in us. It's only his strength and his might in which we will be able to stand against the foe.

And to help us understand how we do this, Paul breaks it out in terms of the armor that Christ our Lord gives us to wear in combat by which he communicates his strength to us and gives us the ability to stand, to fight, and to win. Of course, it's spiritual armor. You can't see it – it's something received by faith; but it's pretty tough stuff. You may remember that when young David faced the mighty giant Goliath, a skilled and heavily armed and armored opponent, it looked like all he was wearing was a linen tunic. But I ask you, who was the best equipped to fight that day? David said, "You come to me with a sword, a spear and a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel." There was really no contest, was there? The strength of God versus the strength of man. Equipped as he was with the unseen Armor of God, David could have toppled a hundred Goliaths before lunch that day. Probably would have too, if the enemy had not fled the field in panic. With this Armor of God, we too can face and defeat the gigantic forces arrayed against us.

So, what does it consist of? First Paul says, "Gird your loins with truth". I suppose it sounds a bit better to say "buckle on the belt of truth"; but that loses something of the idea Paul wants to convey. He's not talking so much about a belt as he is the long strip of linen that men in his day used to wrap around their lower torsos and upper thighs. It's what we would call underwear; but "underwear of truth" doesn't sound very good to us, does it? But the fact is that it's supposed to be offensive. The *truth* that Paul is talking about is the truth that we so much hate to face: that underneath it all we are sinners – weak, naked, and ashamed sinners. We are in our own right unable to stand. We haven't even got the right to be on the Lord's side. We are by nature his enemies. It's by his grace alone that he lets us stand under his banner. That's the truth we are to own first and wear closest to our skin because it's the foundation of everything else that follows.

Next Paul says strap on the Breastplate of Righteousness. The breastplate, of course, was the piece of amour that covered the chest and belly – all the vital organs. It was far and away the most important thing for keeping a warrior alive on the battlefield. And so it is with us: having acknowledged our own sinfulness and shame, what keeps us alive is the righteousness with which God covers us. It's the righteousness of Jesus that's imputed to us by faith. We trust that the Lord Jesus died for sinners, that his death on the cross atoned for our sins, and that by his resurrection he proclaimed victory over sin and death. That's what it means to wear the breastplate of righteousness: to cover our hearts by Christ and his atoning work for us. Then when Satan attacks with accusations of sin we can say, "Yes, underneath I'm a sinner, weak and helpless; but I'm covered by what Christ my Lord did for me when he shed his blood." Coming up against that impenetrably hard surface, the accusations of Satan just bounce off. He cannot strike the heart and take our lives.

On your feet, Paul says, wear the readiness of the Gospel of Peace. Something you learn very fast in the Army is just how important a soldier's feet are. If you can't march, you can't get to the battle. This was especially true in the ancient world because there was no other way to get around. So to be ready, you need to protect your feet and wear good, sturdy, comfortable boots. And your feet are, of course, your point of contact with the earth. So what Paul is talking about here is living the Christian life in this world. He's talking about the

thick soles that keep your feet from damage as you stroll through the jagged rocks and sharp thorns of temptation that lie along your route. He's talking about being prepared at all times to give the reason for the hope that lies within you – that is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. He's talking about being ready to forgive others as you yourself have been forgiven. And he's talking about leaning forward to lend a hand to those in need and to show forth the love of Christ in this dark world. In these ways we bring to the world the peace that we know in Christ our Lord.

Next Paul says take up the Shield of Faith. In Paul's day shields were made of thick animal hides stretched over wooden frames. They were used primarily to defend soldiers from longer range weapons like arrows and stones hurled by slingers. When the enemy loosed a volley, all the soldiers would turn at once and raise their shields to form a wall of protection. Sure, they still had to deal with the impact of the missiles, but the shields absorbed the shock and dissipated it and they kept anything sharp from getting through and wounding anyone on their otherwise unprotected arms and legs. That's how faith protects the soldier of God. Satan has all kinds of arrows and darts to launch at us. You think of Job in the Old Testament, and how he came under a heavy bombardment of everything Satan could throw at him. In one day, he lost all the wealth the Lord had blessed him with. Then, far worse, his ten children were killed when a sudden windstorm caused the collapse of the house they were in. Defended by the shield of faith Job was able to absorb these terrible blows. He said, "I've always trusted in the Lord in the past. He's been good to me. I'm not going to give up on him now." Then Satan attacked Job's health, striking him down with a painful and ugly skin disease. You may remember that in grief Job sat down in the ashes; but still, he stood strong in faith. That's how faith protects us: it doesn't stop the blows from coming; rather it enables us to withstand them. And faith can be strengthened and improved. One way the enemy would try to defeat an army protected by shields was to launch arrows tipped with burning pitch or tar. The goal was to set the shields afire and get the soldiers to drop them – then they'd be exposed. To prevent that from happening, before battle the soldiers would soak their shields in water. Then burning arrows would hit the shields and fizz out. In the same way we can strengthen our faith. We can soak our shields in the water of God's Word and Spirit, we can remember our Baptisms and the promises God our Father made to us then, and we can confess our sins and weaknesses and receive again his absolution and his assurance of forgiveness and love. These are the things that continue to reinforce and strengthen faith so that our shields are not burned by the enemy's fiery attacks.

All right: completing the armor we wear, Paul tells us to place upon our heads the Helmet of Salvation. The idea here is that we keep our focus on the goal. We are to keep the final victory in view and surround our minds with thoughts of the heavenly rewards already laid up for us by the Lord Jesus. We know where we are heading. We know the victory has already been won. And this is what keeps us from discouragement when the going gets tough. No matter how bad it gets, we are certain that there's a bright and glorious future for us that will last forever. We know that today we wear the helmet; but one day soon will wear the crown.

Finally, Paul enjoins us to take up the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. And there's no question about it: a sword is for hand to hand combat. It takes training to know how to handle one, and with it a soldier does two things. First, he can use it to block the attacks of the enemy. You think about Jesus when he was tempted by Satan. Each time the devil made a lunge, Jesus easily parried his attack with a quotation from Scripture. The devil would say, "Hey Jesus, how about this?" And Jesus would reply, "It is written." For point of contrast, you think about how Eve handled her temptation. Satan said, "Did God really say?" And she kind of waffled. What was it God said? She allowed herself to be led astray. In the same way, we can use the Word of God to overcome the lies and distortions of Satan – but only if we train to use it. The Sword of the Spirit only works for you if you've become accustomed to its grip and have practiced swinging it. You have to learn how to block those blows. The second thing a soldier does with a sword is to strike at the enemy. And what I want you to see here is that God's Word is the only offensive weapon we've been given. But then, it's the only one we need. "Not by power, not by might; but by my Word", says the Lord." That's how the Lord accomplishes everything he does: simply by the power of his Word. With his spoken Word he called the Creation into being, and with his Word made flesh he saved us from sin and death. Can we have any doubt that in the pages of the Holy Scripture the Lord has provided us with the most powerful weapon he could possibly have placed into our hands?

And *all* this spiritual combat equipment the Lord gives to us so that his power and strength may be at work in us and through us. Wearing God's Armor we will be able to stand through all trials and temptations, against all the fury and raging of the forces of evil, and with our Lord carry the cross he's assigned and push through to the glory that awaits us. But that necessarily means that we wear it, that every day we put it on again, and that we stand in inspection making sure that we're wearing it right. It's not enough just to have equipment. You have to maintain it, drill and train with it, and practice using it. That's what preparedness is all about. And preparedness is the key to our victory.

May our Gracious Lord, then, who has redeemed us from sin and placed at our disposal all that we need to stand in his strength, give us also the grace and will to put on and wear at all times the full Armor of God, that we may be empowered by him to fight the good fight and win with him a crown of glory that will never spoil or fade. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!