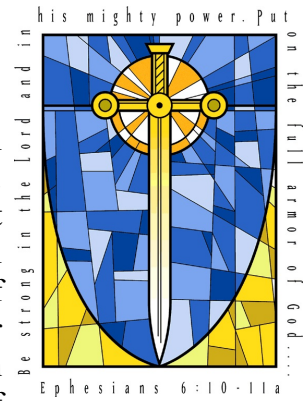


## 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Ordination Sermon

### Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup>and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>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 saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.



### Theme: The Victory is ours in Christ

Twenty years ago I began my ministry in Harrow with an introductory sermon on this text. The theme of that sermon was "Get Ready for Battle!" It happened to be one of the readings for that day. As I look back at the last twenty years, I have to admit that I never thought that the battle would be as tough as it has been. I have struggled with members through some things that I never even dreamed of in seminary as we worked through relationships, doubts, worries, guilt, disappointments, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, crime (both victims and those who committed crimes), grief, and death. About a year and a half ago, I thought that I had experienced everything possible. Then as a pastor of an urban congregation, I had a member who almost died after being gored by a bull! There are many times when the battle has been fierce and the warfare long. There are scars that I still feel today from things that have happened in my ministry. There are many times when I have felt inadequate and unworthy. But in these verses Paul gives us all courage that despite all the schemes and attacks of the devil himself, our strength is in the Lord. The victory is ours through Jesus Christ.

I. We have a very crafty and powerful enemy, who is the devil himself.

Far too often we underestimate his power. Sometimes we might even act as if he were not real. The wife of the pastor, who preached for my ordination sermon, sent me a story early in my ministry in which a pastoral candidate was being examined. He was asked whether he believed that there is a devil. When he answered, "No," there was a great stir among the pastors. They were ready to fail him when the oldest pastor said that it is nothing to worry about. He will learn soon enough just how real the devil is. Too often we act as if there is no devil or that he is no match for us. We think that we can take him on. Then he shows just how weak we are. He brings us into despair and temptation. We get beaten badly and wonder if we will ever stand again. Paul writes in verse 12, "*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.*” It is important for us to realize that the devil is much more powerful than any of us. We are no match for him.

He is also very crafty. In verse 11 Paul writes about the devil’s schemes. I have seen his playbook, and it works very well. He knows exactly what our biggest weaknesses and struggles are, and he attacks us in those areas. He is especially good at attacking the weaknesses that we deny. If there is an addiction that we struggle with, he knows exactly how to put us in a situation in which we are confronted with that temptation. He does that with every temptation that we are prone to, no matter if it is gossip, a hot temper, greed, theft, dishonoring our parents or whatever it may be. He knows exactly where we are weak. When our hearts are filled with sorrow, he knows exactly how to turn it into despair. He is good at robbing us of our hope and peace. In our country he knows exactly how to stop us from worshipping our Lord. He doesn’t keep us away from church on Sunday by force. He gives us so many other choices that seem much more fun than worshipping our Savior. He even knows how to use our strengths against us. We might be kind, compassionate and caring. Then he finds someone to take advantage of those virtues. Suddenly he makes us unsympathetic. But the worst thing about the devil’s cunning is that when we think that we have beaten him, he hits us again even harder when we least expect it. I can’t begin to count the people who thought that they beat an addiction or temptation only to fall into it again. In the last 20 years I have seen just how crafty and powerful the devil is.

II. But I have also seen that Christ gives His people the strength and victory that they need.

He gives us the armor to defeat the devil. When David went against Goliath, it looked like David was no match against him. However, what gave David the victory was not that he was so skilled with the sling. David came against Goliath in the name of the Lord Almighty. God was his strength and his shield.

In every part of the armor that Paul describes, we see that God is with us with His strength, His help, and His salvation. The belt of truth is God’s faithfulness. He will never leave us or forsake us. The breastplate of righteousness is that our sins have been washed away, and we have been clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Our shoes are fitted with the Gospel of peace. Roman armies had couriers, who ran with news. That was how they communicated. In the most difficult days of our lives, we share that good news of the peace of Christ with each other. We also have the shield of faith. There are two words for “shield” in Greek. This word describes a very large shield. When the front line soldiers had these shields in position, they formed a wall. The enemy might try to toss all the flaming darts they wanted, and none of them would get through. Our shield is faith in Christ. He promises to shield us from all the attacks of the evil one. Just like a shield, He was hit in our place. He took the grief, the sorrow, the guilt, and even the punishment that we should have borne. He bore it all for us and shields us from all harm. We also have the helmet of salvation. The Roman helmet wasn’t only used for protection. It was also a symbol of military victory. As Christians we know that the victory belongs to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing that can separate us from God’s love in Christ. In Romans 8 Paul writes that even when trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword threatens us, we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ our Lord. Then Paul says to take up the one offensive weapon that we have, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. When the devil attacks with temptation, we remember our Lord’s commands and respond like Jesus, “It is written...” When the devil accuses us, God’s Word speaks of the

forgiveness of our sins. When the devil brings despair, God's Word sets our hearts at rest again. We share the word with those who live in despair and guilt. That word, clothes them with God's armor and gives them His protection. That armor of God which Paul mentions here is simply clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our protection.

Jesus also gives us unity. The armor that Paul describes is that of the soldiers who were on the front lines. Alone, each soldier would have been no match for the enemy, but together they were a strong army, that no one could conquer. In my twenty years, I have seen just how important Christian unity is. Christianity is not a private transaction with God. As Christians we become part of the body of Christ. We are one in Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. That will be the theme of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary that kicks off next week. We might look different, talk different, and have different interests. We might not even like each other that much. But as a Christian congregation we are family. I can't begin to tell you how important it is that we encourage each other. We look out for each other. We help one another. We pray for one another. When we stand united in Christ, the devil can attack as hard as he wants, and there is nothing that he can do to break a bond that is strong in Christ.

Jesus also gives us prayer. Paul ends this section with an appeal for prayer. Again this centers on Christ because we pray in His name. He encourages us to pray for each other. Be alert to the needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray for them and pray with them. Finally, Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him that the words will be given to him to boldly proclaim the Gospel. I would ask the same of you, that you remember me in your prayers. In today's society it is tempting to be timid about the Gospel even for a preacher. Pray that God will give me and our deacons the words to say. Prayer is that connection that God gives to bring both our praises and our needs directly to Him.

As I look at the last twenty years, there are times when I have felt battle-worn as a pastor. I have seen the devil schemes and power against me and the members of my congregations. We are no match for him, but that is why I also God for the victory that He gives to us in Christ our Savior. We are weak, but He is strong. He clothes us with His strength. He gives us His peace. He binds us together as one. He gives us the direct line to heaven in prayer.

May God bless our ministry together that we will not fall to the devil's cunning and strength by relying on ourselves, but that we might have the confidence that the victory is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

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